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Yu Shimizu
ILLUSTRATION
Asagi Tosaka
The
Demon Sword Master
of Excalibur Academy

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The
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of Excalibur Academy

"I like your pluck, girl. I'll take you up on that challenge."
"...G-give Leo back!"

"Miss Selia...I feel as though you've been growing a bit greedy, lately."
"N-no, I'm not!"

"Eye of the Witch, Mode Shift! Vorpal Ray!"
"Fire!"

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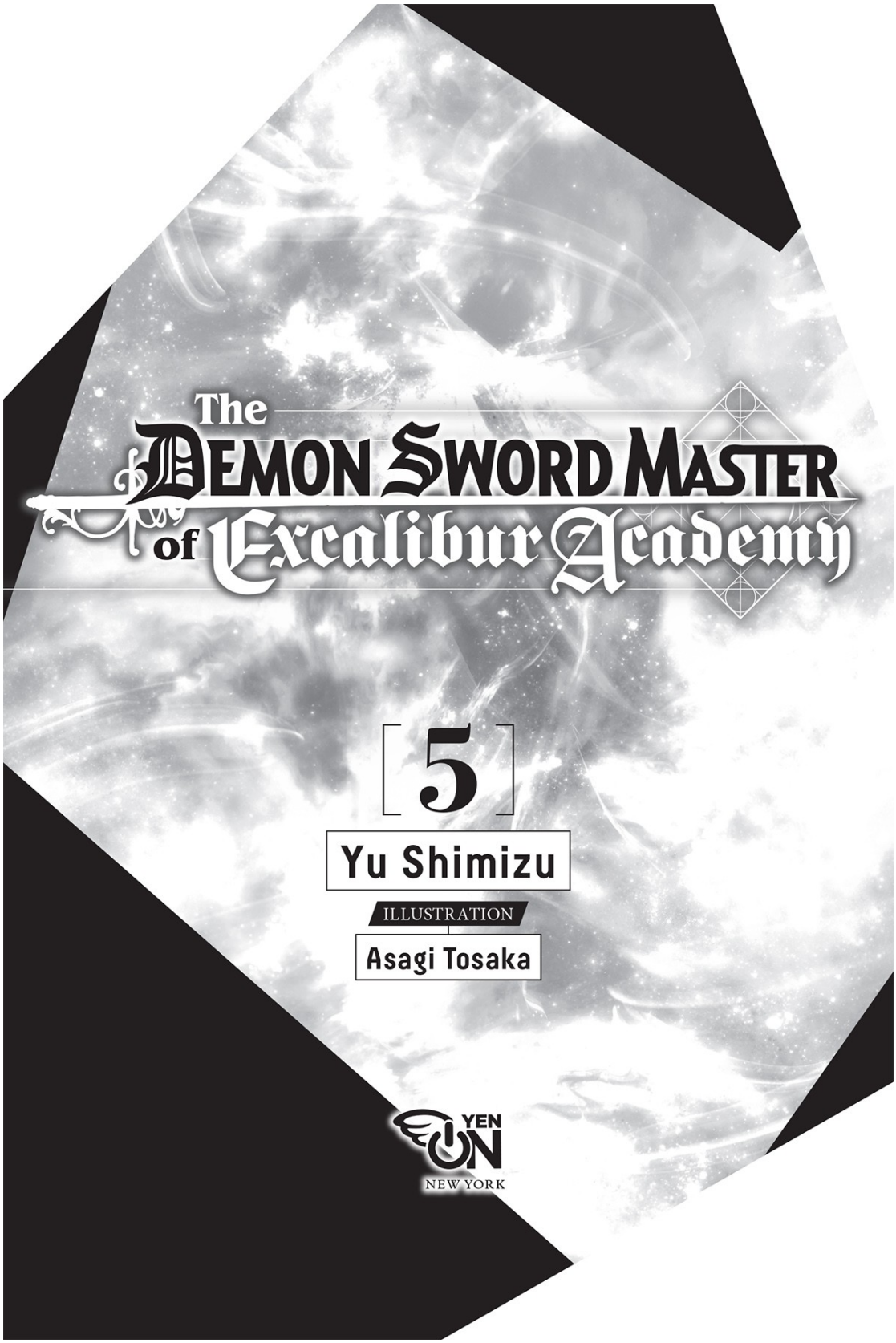
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Yu Shimizu
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Characters

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

Riselia

A girl who became Leonis's minion and, at the same time, his guardian.

Leonis

The Undead King and greatest Dark Lord. Was reborn after a thousand years, but for some reason, he ended up in the form of a ten-year-old boy.

Regina

Riselia's personal maid.
Harboring a secret.

Sakuya

A girl from the Sakura Orchid, a place ravaged by the Voids.
A master swordswoman.

Elfiné

Operator of Leonis's platoon.
Heiress of the Phillet Company.

Shary

An assassin maid. One of Leonis's dark minions.
Loves sweets.

Blackas

One of Leonis's dark minions and prince of the Realm of Shadows. Very fluffy.

Veira

The Dragon Lord excavated from the northern tundra.
Like Leonis, she is a Dark Lord.

PROLOGUE

It happened six months ago.

The countless red lights flickering in the darkness were despair given form.

“What’s going on?! Why are they hatching all of a sudden?!”

“Elfiné, we need a status report—”

“Thirteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-eight… This can’t be, how…?!”

Elfiné focused on getting a handle on the situation, despite the chaotic state of her squad. As an elite unit that represented the academy, they had been tasked with investigating a Void Hive. It should have been no different from past missions.

It wasn’t that they were careless. The seventh platoon, led by Liat Guinness the Blazing Lion, would never act recklessly in the heart of the Void’s territory.

No, they had simply been unlucky.

Everything had happened so swiftly. Elfiné’s Eye of the Witch hadn’t even detected signs. The first to hatch was a specimen that resembled a cross between a gigantic insect and a lizard. And by the time the platoon was aware of it, their vanguard, Zack, was decapitated.

It was only the group’s rigorous training that kept them from screaming when they saw Zack’s head fly off. The platoon captain, Liat, reacted promptly and appropriately, ordering a swift retreat. They attempted to escape via a route they’d set up ahead of time. While they made their departure, Elfiné received a request for aid from an allied platoon. That’s when—

“■■■■■■■■■■■!”

—the Void specimen that slew Zack let out a dissonant screech, which acted as an intense EMP, rendering the platoon’s magical apparatuses inoperable.

Crack… Crack… Crack…!

The sound of something crystalline fracturing echoed. It was the reverberating noise of despair.

“Lesca and I will make a way forward. Elfiné, cover us!”

Liat’s Holy Sword incinerated a newly hatched small Void. Unfortunately, there was no preventing more of the monstrous things from emerging. Thirty-four of them, thirty-seven, forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four… It was a nightmare. A small-scale Void Stampede.

“…Eye of the Witch, Mode Shift…!” Elfiné tried to switch her Holy Sword over to its offensive mode.

“Finé!”

Before she had the chance, however, Lesca tugged on her arm and pulled her down to the floor. No sooner had Elfiné hit the ground than a Void’s scything arm cleaved Lesca through.

“Lesca… No… Lesca… Aaaaaaah…!”

Watching another of her companions fall right before her eyes caused Elfiné’s mind to go blank. Her Holy Sword’s orbs, which had been deployed around her, faded away.

“Elfiné, get up! Elfiné—”

Liat tugged on Elfiné’s arm and led her away. She couldn’t remember what happened next.

Two Holy Swordsmen died during an investigation on a newly excavated Void Hive. And on that same day, Elfiné Phillet lost part of her Holy Sword’s power.

CHAPTER 1
THE TYRANNICAL DRAGON LORD

"…Hey, where's Leo? He's here somewhere, right?"

A girl with crimson air floated in the air. She was speaking to two stunned figures watching from the window. There was an almost violent beauty to the strange girl. Smooth, unblemished skin. Shapely limbs that looked like they had been sculpted by a goddess of beauty. Her eyes glinted like smoldering rubies.

Unconcerned with how she was being perceived, the young woman lorded over her audience like a tyrant reigning supreme over the heavens.

"I'll ask you one more time. Where's Leo?" The devilish girl's voice was as cold as ice. Her crimson locks shook violently, the air around her crackling.

"Y-you…!" Riselia exclaimed, finally regaining enough composure to speak as she gawked out the second-floor window. "Who are you?"

"Oh. A mere human asks for my name?"

"…?!"

Riselia shivered beneath the burning gaze of the floating girl. The Vampire Queen suddenly felt like a rabbit being eyed by a dragon.

Wh-what's with this girl…? She's looking for Leo? Why…?

Riselia bravely met the crimson-haired girl's stare despite her instinctual panic to hide the boy behind her back. That defiant attitude only served to sour the floating young woman's mood, however.

"Foolish human." The girl quietly thrust her right hand forward, producing a small, orange fireball. "Crimson Flare—," she began chanting.

The sphere of flame quickly swelled.

"Wait, Veira!" the boy behind Riselia called out, stepping into view.

Leo?!

Riselia turned around and saw Leonis bitterly glaring up at the hovering girl he had called Veira. The crimson-haired girl's eyebrows jumped in surprise.

"Child. Did you just speak my name?" she asked.

"Yes. I am…Leonis."

"…Huh?" Veira eyed Leonis sharply at his admission. "What is this? Are you using a child in an attempt to fool me?"

"Would a child have this?" Leonis replied, producing a staff as tall as he was from the shadow at his feet.

Veira's ruby eyes widened with disbelief. "…The Staff of Sealed Sins… It can't be!"

“For now, come inside, and we can talk. I have…things I must ask you,” Leonis said before turning around and moving away from the window.

“Leo…,” Riselia protested with clear discomfort.

“Don’t worry, Miss Selia. She’s an old…yes, a very old friend.”

Veira contemplated the suggestion from her spot in the air for a while. Eventually, she shrugged. “…Hmm. Well, I suppose it’s best to hear the explanation for all of this.”

The crimson-haired girl landed on the windowsill and entered the room.

◆

After entering his room with the strange young woman, Leonis locked the door behind him and immediately erected a barrier preventing sound from leaving the room. He then took one long, deep breath.

“…How are you still alive, you bloody fool?!” he bellowed, thrusting the tip of his staff at the young woman’s nose, even though she was a head taller than him.

Yes, Leonis knew who this person was. She was the very same red dragon discovered in the block of ice recently exhumed from the tundra. She was of the eight Dark Lords: Veira Greater Dragon, the Dragon Lord. Or rather, this was her human form.

Veira regarded Leonis with an elegant, confident smirk worthy of an absolute sovereign. “That’s a foolish question. I am the ruler of the dragons, the most powerful form of life this world has ever known. You hardly hold the monopoly on immortality, Leo.”

“…!”

Those words weren’t a bluff. Having fought Veira countless times, Leonis was convinced she spoke the truth.

…Right. Even if someone were to slay her successfully, Veira isn’t the kind to stay dead.

“I can understand you still being alive. But weren’t you corrupted by the power of emptiness?” Leonis asked bitterly.

Upon being released from her seal within the ice block, Veira’s body was corrupted by the Void miasma, which gradually transformed her into a Void Lord. After she had rampaged in the skies of the Seventh Assault Garden, she had seemingly perished in a duel with Leonis.

Veira shook her head with evident confusion.

“…Are you saying you can’t remember fighting me?” Leonis questioned.

“No. Or, well, I suppose there are some vague memories…,” Veira admitted, placing a finger on her lips pensively, as if trying to remember something. “Right before I awakened from my seal, I thought I heard someone’s voice…and then I completely lost consciousness. The next thing I knew, I was below the sea. That was a surprise. My body was mostly destroyed. Had I stayed that way much longer, I’d have truly met my end. Thus, I discarded my body and assumed this form. This is my worst awakening to date.”

“So you’re saying you cut yourself off from your body when the emptiness consumed it?”

“I don’t know what this ‘emptiness’ you keep mentioning is, but I suppose that would be the gist of it, yes. Unfortunately, that means I left the majority of my power back there.”

You really are like a lizard, Leonis thought, but he knew better than to say as much aloud.

Calling Veira a lizard was taboo, and would only serve to incur her wrath.

“But all that aside…” Veira poked Leonis’s forehead with an impish smile. “I could tell you were the one who killed me immediately, Leo. You’re the only one who could slay me like that, after all.”

“Well, we have fought many times before… W-wait, what are you doing?!”

Veira inched closer to Leonis’s head and started sniffing his hair.

“This is indeed your scent. It really is you, Leo.”

Veira’s cleavage was thrust before Leonis’s eyes. He hurriedly looked away, his cheeks flushed.

“Don’t tell me you followed my smell back here?” Leonis asked.

Unlike the days when he had an undead body, Leonis now bathed daily because of his clean freak of a minion. As keen as a dragon’s nose might have been, Veira shouldn’t have been able to track him with it.

I’m in a human body. Veira shouldn’t be familiar with anything about me in this form.

“I traced your magical wavelength,” Veira responded matter-of-factly, shaking her head. “A dragon can trace the trail of one’s mana.”

“Oh, right…,” Leonis said, gazing into the glint of Veira’s golden eyes. He kept his magical energy concealed most of the time, but evidently, that wasn’t enough to fool Veira.

“Your scent has changed, however. It smells rather refreshing. Like flowers…,” Veira remarked and inched her face closer to sniff at Leonis’s hair again.

The flower aroma was because he’d been using Riselia’s shampoo.

“Speaking of differences, I think it’s about time you started answering my questions, too,” Veira stated, folding her arms and looking down at Leonis. “Why, exactly, do you look like a child?”

“…Let us just say some unexpected developments led to me reincarnating incorrectly,” Leonis answered uncomfortably.

“Wait, *you* failed at sorcery?” Veira pressed, gazing fixedly at the other Dark Lord’s face. “I suppose strange things do happen.”

“Reincarnation is twelfth-order sorcery with many uncertain factors,” Leonis countered, frowning.

Veira considered something for a moment. “Hmm. You truly look nothing like you used to. You really were cute during your hero days, right?”

“Mind your own business.”

“And you even behave like a child.”

Veira sat on Leonis’s mattress, snickering. Her crimson hair spilled over the white sheets. She kicked her beautiful, slender legs forward and dangled them off the side.

“Don’t sit on my bed,” Leonis chided her, but she ignored him.

“So this is the Undead King’s new castle, is it?” Veira said, looking around the room curiously.

“For the time being,” Leonis replied tersely.

“A tad cramped, don’t you think? Was Death Hold in Necrozoa ruined?”

“Well, I heard Azure Hold has sunk to the bottom of the ocean,” Leonis shot back coldly.

Veira shrugged. “Yes, it went down along with the Divine Dragon the Luminous Powers sent to challenge me.” She then turned her eyes to a picture frame sitting on a bedside table. It was a commemorative photograph the eighteenth platoon had taken upon winning their first training match. Veira’s eyes settled on Riselia in the image. “That girl is an undead minion, yes? The wavelength of her mana wasn’t the same as a normal human’s.”

“Yes, she’s my vampire subordinate.”

“A vampire, hmm? That’s quite the prize.”

“Indeed.”

Riselia wasn’t just any vampire, but the highest grade of undead, a Vampire Queen. Leonis didn’t volunteer that information, though.

“She’s a fool to have tried to challenge a Dark Lord like me, but the fact she was willing to defend you with her life was admirable. She’s a fine servant,” Veira praised.

“That she is.”

Leonis was caught up in the pleasure of hearing his favored minion complimented when it happened. Veira lifted her dangling legs and snaked them around his neck, pulling him back toward the bed in a choke hold.

“…Ngh… What…are you…?!” Leonis managed, even as her legs strangled him. He tried to shake Veira off, but he had only a ten-year-old’s strength. The sensation of her thighs against the back of his head grew tighter.

“You dared to kill me, Leo.”

“Y-you’re still…alive…aren’t you…?!” Leonis croaked.

“I was mostly dead. And you tried to turn me into your minion, didn’t you?”

Squeeze.

“What were you trying to gain by turning me into a mindless skeleton dragon, hmm?”

Squeeze. Squeeze.

“N-no…it was…the Void…Voids…,” Leonis gasped out, struggling for air all the while.

“…Voids? You’ve mentioned that before.”

The pressure of Veira’s thighs slackened a bit.

“While you… I mean, while we were sealed, this world changed drastically,” Leonis explained after a deep breath.

“…So it seems,” Veira muttered, looking out the windows at Excalibur Academy’s facilities. “Tell me, Leo… What happened?” A slight shade of anxiety crossed the Dragon Lord’s eyes.

◆

What are they talking about? Riselia thought, listening carefully at Leonis's door. They had to be whispering, because she couldn't hear even a peep. *He called her an old friend, but…*

Leonis looked like a boy, but his true identity was that of an ancient, powerful sorcerer. Did that mean this girl was also from that bygone era?

I really don't know anything about Leo, do I…?

The realization caused Riselia to sigh. Just who was that boy she'd found in the ruins? And that fiercely beautiful, red-haired girl… Were she and Leonis well acquainted? If she was an old friend, she was no doubt even closer to him than Riselia was.

As Riselia agonized over such thoughts in front of the door, she twined an argent lock of her hair around a fingertip.

It kind of feels like I'm jealous of her…

The back of Riselia's hand brushed against her cheek, which felt oddly feverish. She then breathed out heavily, as though trying to vent that heat.

And there was something I wanted to ask Leo, too. Riselia brought her hand to her chest, clenching it into a fist over her heart. *Just what was that…?*

When the gigantic dragon had run amok, Riselia had been attacked by that mysterious priest called Nefakess in the Sixth Assault Garden's laboratory. She had met the man once before in the ruins of the Third Assault Garden.

With the help of Sakuya and that odd elf girl, Arle, Riselia had been able to fight him off. Yet before leaving, Nefakess had placed some kind of triangular black stone fragment inside Riselia's heart. Three and a half days had passed, but there had been no change.

It could have merely been a trick by Nefakess, yet Riselia remained worried. Who was that odd priest anyhow? Their first encounter had been a coincidence; that much, Riselia was sure of. But when they had clashed the other day, it was clearly because he'd sought her out.

Leo didn't seem to know him, but…

"—Selia, Lady Selia, we have a crater in the backyard…!"

Footsteps sounded as someone hurried up the stairs. The door swung open, revealing a young woman in a maid's uniform brandishing a musket.

"Regina…" Riselia turned to face her.

"Are you okay, Lady Selia…?!" Regina heaved a sigh of relief when she saw her. She walked briskly into the room, with her Holy Sword—set in its rifle form, the Drag Striker—in hand. Then she leaned out the window, peering at the massive crater that had been cleaved into their backyard. "Is it a Void attack…?"

"Ah… No," Riselia managed to reply, shaking her head.

"Really?" Regina repeated, a bit shocked.

“Ah, er, well, it’s…” Riselia’s eyes darted around as she floundered for an explanation. “Oh, yes, it was, that! That…bug showed up!”

“That bug?”

“You know, *that* bug! The kind they say that if you see one, there’s a hundred more nearby!”

“That bug… You don’t mean…*that* bug?” Regina asked, shivering with disgust.

“Yes. The bug that once menaced all of Hræsvelgr dorm. We had Miss Finé use her Eye of the Witch to find their hive and fought them for three days before finally claiming victory, remember? One of them showed up in the kitchen again.”

“…N-no!”

“Don’t worry. I had Leo blow it to smithereens,” Riselia stated, casting her gaze to the crater outside.

“I see.” Regina nodded gravely. “Those bugs always were really resilient…”

“Yes. If we don’t combat them like they’re Voids, that nightmare could repeat itself.”

Regina was seemingly convinced, and the Drag Striker faded into thin air. “Well, they’re kind of like Voids in the sense that their nests are really problematic…,” she remarked, trailing off. “Oh, speaking of—Miss Selia, did you see the message this morning?”

Riselia shook her head. She hadn’t yet checked her terminal today.

“The academy’s reconnaissance planes detected a large Void Hive,” Regina said. She took out her terminal and projected a small, three-dimensional map.

“…Wait, no way…” Riselia’s eyes widened in shock. “Isn’t this where Leo…?”

“…Right, it’s near the ruins we were investigating at the time.”

This new Void Hive had been discovered in a large forest growing near the entrance to the underground ruins where Leonis was found. A thick miasma now permeated the entire wood, earning it the moniker the Forest of Death.

“…Well, there were Voids in the ruins where Leo was,” Riselia recalled, staring gravely at the terminal’s screen. She could never forget that. It was the day she’d lost her life.

“The administration bureau wants to organize an extermination unit as early as tomorrow and send them on-site ASAP,” explained Regina.

“…That makes sense.”

Since the Seventh Assault Garden had the greatest number of Holy Swordsmen out of the bunch, it constantly fought on the front lines. Even so, Hive extermination missions were the most perilous missions. The mortality rate during those missions was markedly high compared with other duties.

“Did they ask the eighteenth platoon to participate?” Selia asked.

“Not yet,” Regina replied. “But it’s possible they will.”

“Yeah…”

There were three reasons that made it likely. First, Riselia and Regina once investigated the ruins near the Forest of Death, and they were familiar with the area’s topography. Second, the information Elfiné gathered at the time as their operator would be useful for the current situation. And last, they’d recently accomplished the impressive task of returning safely from an excursion to the Third Assault Garden.

“Understood. Let’s make sure we’re ready, just in case they call on us.”

“Yes, Lady Selia.”

◆

Leonis explained the situation of the world to Veira, using his terminal to provide visual references. He told her of the Voids, the unknown enemies that appeared from dimensional rifts. He informed her of the Holy Swords: a supernatural power certain people wielded that was different from sorcery. And he described the Integrated Empire that formed following the Voids’ invasions.

Leonis even made sure Veira was aware of how the Archsage Arakael Degradios and the Holy Woman Tearis Resurrectia had been revived and of the mysterious forces that seemed to be behind their return. Most importantly, he revealed the Voids had corrupted the Goddess Roselia’s reincarnated body.

“…Voids, you say. Those things have been running rampant through this world?” Veira muttered softly after quietly listening to Leonis’s story.

It was a lot to take in at once, so Leonis worried Veira might have difficulty grasping it all. However, she was wise and comprehended swiftly.

“So the ones that altered me with that power of emptiness were the same who attempted resurrecting the Holy Woman?” Veira asked with cold wrath plain in her voice.

Leonis nodded. “So it would seem.”

Nefakess Reizaad, the white-haired bishop he’d seen in the ruined city, had also appeared when Veira had awakened. He’d sent Shade Fiend assassins to scout. That couldn’t have been a coincidence. The bishop must have been involved with Tearis’s and Veira’s revivals.

“Nefakess Reizaad. He was an officer in the Dark Lords’ Armies,” Veira remarked.

“Yes. A confidant of Azra-Ael.”

Azra-Ael, the Devil of the Underworld, was the most senior and oldest of the Dark Lords in service to the goddess, but his history was mostly unknown. Supposedly, the Goddess of Rebellion had summoned him from some other world, but what precisely that meant was unclear.

“Azra-Ael… Has he returned as well?” wondered Veira.

“I don’t know,” Leonis replied, shaking his head.

Regardless, it was obvious his confidant Nefakess was active and manipulating things behind the scenes. Perhaps he was working under the Devil of the Underworld's orders, seeking to revive his master.

But if Azra-Ael were to be restored, what then?

Would he seek out the goddess's reincarnation and rebuild the Dark Lords' Armies like Leonis? Or was his goal something else?

Veira's loyalty to Roselia has never been in question, mused Leonis. If they shared the same objective, perhaps they could join forces. However…

Leonis's grip on the Staff of Sealed Sins tightened. His Demon Sword was sealed inside that rod. It was a weapon meant to slay the Goddess of Rebellion should the power of the Voids corrupt her. Such was the mission placed upon the blade Leonis had been given.

It wasn't apparent what the mastermind behind all the recent incidents sought. Yet it was clear they'd polluted the goddess's reincarnated body with the Voids. That alone was enough of a reason for Leonis to oppose them. What's more, Nefakess had also made attempts on the lives of Riselia and Shary, his minions.

And no matter what his goals might be, that justifies a thousand deaths, Leonis thought, dark light shining in his eyes.

"A mere officer of the Dark Lords' Armies trying to use me for their petty ends? There's no end to his foolishness," Veira spat.

"Nefakess could be scheming to awaken the other Dark Lords, too," Leonis noted.

"But didn't they all perish a thousand years ago?" Veira questioned.

"Yes, but the other Dark Lords weren't the types to stay dead, either. Truthfully, I was convinced you perished in the battle against the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes."

"That fight certainly left me in a precarious state, but I managed to escape. I hibernated in the tundra until some fools decided to dig me out…" Veira rose from Leonis's bed, her red locks flowing down to her waist. "And thanks to that, I've risen in an incomplete state. Even worse, those Voids corrupting me forced me to give up the majority of my powers. Recovery will take a while."

"That rampage was just because you were grouchy after waking up?" Leonis cracked an ironic smile.

Veira glared at him and then approached the window, stretching. Beyond it was a clear night sky. The Central Garden's high-rises stood in the distance.

"I think I'll go take a look around the human city," Veira said. "It looks fun."

"What…?" Leonis stammered in a panic. "W-wait!"

"What?" Veira directed a dubious gaze at him.

"This is my kingdom. Don't go around like you own the place."

Veira, the Dragon Lord. The Dark Lord who reigned over the dragons. That which comes with the storm. A living, breathing catastrophic

maelstrom. Who could say what might happen if Leonis let someone like her run loose…

Do you have any idea about the lengths I went to just to keep my power hidden?!

Of course, Leonis hadn't done a masterful job of concealing his true strength at all, but he wasn't aware of that.

"Your kingdom? Hmm…I really can't strut about as I please then, can I?" Veira turned around and regarded Leonis with a foreboding smile. "Why don't you show me around the place, then?"

"What? Why should I have to—?"

"If you don't want to, that's fine. I can go myself."

Biting his lip, Leonis bitterly conceded. "…W-wait! Fine. I'll escort you."

"Seeing the world a thousand years later should definitely help stave off my boredom," Veira commented with a pleased smile.

◆

Half of the Seventh Assault Garden's anti-Void laboratory had caved in when the dragon-class Void Lord awakened from within the ice block, and the place was in the middle of hasty repairs. Standing atop the rubble was a woman with sleek black hair. She was clad in a white coat.

"You don't have to act so distantly, Finé."

"…What are you scheming at, Clauvia?"

A girl wearing a school uniform and sporting equally sleek black hair down to her waist stood beside the woman.

"Would you believe me if I told you I'm working for humanity's salvation?" Clauvia Phillet, Elfiné's older sister, questioned with a bothered smile.

Elfiné had no intention of believing that kind of nonsense, of course. "… What happened to that Void Lord?" she asked with a sigh.

"We've scoured the seafloor, but came up with nothing." Clauvia shrugged and then shook her head.

Clauvia's research team had discovered a gigantic ice block in the northern tundra and brought it back to their facility. The Void Lord hibernating within it had suddenly awakened, broken free, and rampaged through the Sixth and Seventh Assault Gardens. It then had directed its attention to the ocean, where it mysteriously disappeared from the sensors and had not been detected since.

"You called it a Dark Lord…," Elfiné said, glaring sharply at her sister.

A Dark Lord, bringers of catastrophe spoken of in fairy tales. Was that dragon somehow different from previously encountered Void Lords?

"Yes. In ages past, they ruled over the world. Duke Crystalia posited that the Dark Lords could be our trump card in stopping the Voids' invasion," Clauvia replied.

Elfiné cocked an eyebrow suspiciously. "Duke Crystalia…?"

Riselia's father…? But why?

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you any more, Finé,” Clauvia stated. “Not unless you come with me to the capital.”

“What do you need my help for?” the younger sibling inquired.

“I already told you. Humanity’s salvation.”

“…” Elfiné knew her sister wasn’t to be trusted. Clauvia Phillet was a witch.

“You’re breaking my heart, Finé. Have you no faith in your big sister?”

“You have a lot of nerve asking me that…”

“Fine, I understand,” Clauvia said with a bitter smile. “Then I guess I’ll need to regain my baby sister’s confidence. Look, I’ll give you one thing you really want.” Clauvia reached into her coat’s pocket and pulled out a small memory device. She casually tossed it over to Elfiné, who fumbled to catch it.

“What’s this?” Elfiné demanded.

“Data on the Phillet Company. You’ve infiltrated their system a few times, haven’t you?”

“…!”

It was true. Elfiné had used her Eye of the Witch to repeatedly access the Astral Garden.

“Oh, and don’t worry, I’m the only one who’s noticed. Well, for now, anyway,” Clauvia remarked, waving a hand dismissively.

“What is this data?” Elfiné asked.

“The D Project.” Clauvia chanted the words, like the verse of a song.

Elfiné was taken aback. The D Project was a name she’d encountered several times while sneaking into the Phillet Company’s servers. However, the information was too heavily encrypted and guarded for her to decipher it alone.

“Its formal name is the Demon Sword Project. An endeavor to create a power that would stand equal to the Holy Swords,” Clauvia explained.

“Demon Swords…”

The title invoked memories of events that had taken place several weeks ago. When the royal family’s personal craft, the *Hyperion*, was attacked by demi-human terrorists. The insurgents who took the Academy’s students hostage used abilities similar to Holy Swords—and they called those powers Demon Swords.

“The D Project is researching a method of evolving Holy Swords. But unfortunately, many of the Holy Swordsmen involved with its experiments experienced mental abnormalities and became unstable and violent. Quite a few of them died.”

“Evolving Holy Swords?!” Elfiné exclaimed, aghast. “Holy Swords are a power granted to humankind by the planet. That kind of work is—”

“Yes, it’s top secret,” Clauvia interjected. “And it hasn’t been especially fruitful, so the Phillet Company washed its hands of it pretty quickly. But…” She brought her lips to Elfiné’s ears. “Recently, someone new took over the

division working on this and has been continuing the experiments somewhere else."

"…Somewhere else?"

"Yes. The perfect place for such research. Where there are plenty of young men and women who have only just awakened to their Holy Swords…"

"…No!"

◆

"…Make her pay…! She'll pay… That woman, she'll rue the day…!"

A young man sat on a bench in the Central Garden, muttering to himself manically. He had fair features and golden hair, but his face was contorted in an angry expression. His Excalibur Academy uniform was wrinkled and shabby.

Muselle Rhodes, elder son of the dignified House Rhodes…and the *previous* wielder of a Holy Sword bearing the powerful ability of domination.

While he had talent and the support that came with being the child of a count, he rarely went on Void exterminations. Instead, he was waited upon by other students, daughters of petty nobility. That lifestyle had recently come to an end, however, when he'd lost the power of his Holy Sword.

"…Dammit… Dammit! It's all that woman's fault…and that brat's!" Muselle howled, unconcerned that others might be watching.

Muselle had believed his duel with the talentless Riselia Crystalia was an assured victory. Yet he'd lost, and his Holy Sword was shattered before a large audience. Ever since, he'd failed to manifest his Holy Sword again. And one who couldn't produce their Holy Sword did not count as a Holy Swordsman.

The girls that had been under his spell were freed, and all had left his side.

"You made a fool out of me…Riselia… You and that braaaaat!"

Muselle's fury knew no bounds. He'd strip Riselia naked and shame her before that stupid boy's eyes. She could scream and weep and beg, but he would never show her mercy. He'd subject her to humiliation words could never describe, and only then would he place her under his Holy Sword's control, using her as a slave until she died!

As Muselle's heart seethed with anger and hatred…

"Answer me. Do you seek the power to make that wish a reality?"

…There was a voice that sounded in his mind—the merciful, affectionate tones of a goddess.

CHAPTER 2
THE GODDESS'S VOICE

The Central Garden was the core of the Seventh Assault Garden, the heart of this massive artificial island city. It was also where Excalibur Academy was situated. Many leisure facilities had been established throughout the area to meet the needs of the students who spent their days in arduous training. Large integrated commercial centers had been erected. Stadiums and various sports halls also dotted the district. Game centers, boutiques, clothing stores, eateries…

There were similar establishments on Excalibur Academy's campus, too, but many students preferred to spend their time in the Central Garden instead. In contrast to the recent storm, the azure sky was cloudless today.

Among the students who crowded the streets, the very cause of the recent squall was walking about, poised and confident. Her beautiful crimson hair trailed after her as she strode along, prompting stares from the passersby.

"Hmm. So this is what the humans' citadel cities look like nowadays? Things certainly have changed."

Veira peered left and right at the high-rise buildings with a chocolate-mint ice cream in one hand. She wore a pair of short denim pants and a white camisole. Leonis had bought this outfit for her from one of the nearby clothing stores.

It hadn't been long since Leonis entered Excalibur Academy, so he didn't have many credits to his name. That had made the purchase a rather painful one. Still, he couldn't have Veira gallivanting about town in her half-naked getup.

Leonis sidled up to her and whispered into her ear, "Aren't you going to hide your horns?"

"What? No. A dragon's horns are her pride. If anything, I kind of want to make them longer…" The Dragon Lord punctuated this by cheerfully taking a lick of her ice cream.

Leonis reminded himself that demi-humans lived on the island, so Veira didn't necessarily stand out… And at worst, he could claim the horns were some kind of fashion statement.

Veira cast her gaze down the street and cocked her head inquisitively. "What's that doing there?" she asked.

The buildings ahead of them were bordered off with warning tape, and behind the blockade, a large vehicle was towing away a mountain of rubble.

"The storm you caused yesterday destroyed a few of the buildings," Leonis replied dryly.

“Really? They’re more fragile than they look.”

“I don’t think many buildings exist that could withstand the Dragon Lord’s whirlwinds.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Leonis glared at Veira, who didn’t seem the slightest bit apologetic. Thankfully, the Seventh Assault Garden had been swiftly alerted to the situation and had promptly entered first combat form. It moved most of the buildings underground and out of harm’s way, so many structures were unharmed. The Sixth Assault Garden, which was currently docked with the Seventh, took the brunt of the damage.

“It’s quite the spectacle, though,” Veira commented. “A diminutive race that can neither breathe fire nor soar through the sky making this kind of city? It’s praiseworthy.”

“I was surprised at how far humanity’s magical technology has advanced. It’s a world of difference compared to a thousand years ago,” Leonis replied.

“Yet while they have advanced in some ways, sorcery is all but extinct… Correct?”

Leonis nodded. “That’s right. Although perhaps it’s only natural. With technology having developed to such an extent, learning ancient sorcery has become unnecessary. It takes a long time and a great deal of talent to handle it, after all.”

Mastering even elementary spells like Itinerant Dialogue demanded substantial aptitude. Compared to that, using small, earring-shaped communication terminals was far more straightforward.

As far as Leonis had researched, the rapid advances in magical technology began roughly 180 years ago, when the government that preceded the Integrated Empire underwent an industrial revolution. Construction on the Assault Gardens had, in fact, commenced before the Void invasion took place sixty-four years ago.

It’s almost like they predicted the Voids’ invasion.

What had sparked that sudden leap forward…? Leonis still couldn’t muster a definitive answer.

“And this city can even move over the ocean, right?” Veira asked.

“Yes, although the mana furnace it used to move was destroyed when I fought Arakael, so it’s currently under repair.”

“Then why are you ordering me around? You’ve been wrecking this place, too,” Veira remarked with a frown. “Can it fly?”

“No, it can’t.”

Riselia had told Leonis that the Ninth Assault Garden, which was currently under construction in the capital, was set to be smaller in scale and would have some limited aviation capabilities.

“That means my Azure Hold is superior,” Veira proclaimed.

“The Divine Dragon destroyed that, though,” Leonis dismissed. “If you ask me, Azra-Ael’s Otherworldly Castle was far more menacing, with how it could phase in and out wherever it wished.”

Veira pouted. “That’s not a fair comparison. Speaking of, your base was around here, wasn’t it?”

Sullenly, Leonis shook his head. “Necrozoa was destroyed. The underground ruins might still remain, but—”

The Undead King was suddenly cut off when an open-top vehicle pulled over next to him and Veira.

“…?”

“Hey there, pretty lady. Wanna come with us on a drive?”

Sitting inside were three young men clad in Excalibur Academy uniforms—upperclassmen. Their gazes rudely raked over Veira's shapely limbs.

"What are they doing, Leo?" Veira inquired.

"Hitting on you," Leonis replied briskly.

Had they been hitting on Riselia, Leonis would have used his Aura of Death to strike such terror into their hearts that the afterlife would appear a sweet escape. However, this was Veira, so he didn't care.

"C'mon, driving with us has gotta be more fun than having to babysit this kid," one of the boys said.

"Hey, you don't know, maybe he's her baby brother," another student remarked. "It's cool, he can come with us, too."

"Hmm," Veira hummed with cold disinterest. "That's some nerve you've got there. Mere humans, aroused with lust for me?" Her golden eyes shone menacingly.

"H-hey, Veira," Leonis whispered, panicked over the dangerous vibe she was giving off.

The Dragon Lord had been forced to discard her body, corrupted by Voids as it was, and had lost most of her power. Yet even in this state, she possessed more than enough strength to level the area. And indeed, just this slight sliver of wrath was enough to…

Bang!

…Make the vehicle's hood loudly explode.

"Eeeeeek!"

The young men drove off in a flustered panic, terrified by the abrupt blast.

"…I told you not to cause any havoc," Leonis chided grumpily.

Veira shrugged, her hands on her waist. "Oh, come now. Out of respect for you, I didn't reduce them to ashes."

"…Tch, let's just get out of here before the city guards show up," Leonis decided, tugging on Veira's arm and pulling her into a jog.

"What, are we playing tag now?" Veira snickered devilishly.

◆

"…Aww, I'm losing sight of Leo!"

"Don't worry. I'm tracking him by his terminal."

Two small shadows were hiding behind the nearby buildings as they watched that small explosion; a noble and her maid, Riselia and Regina.

It all started thirty minutes ago. Leonis wouldn't leave his room, and the two of them grew suspicious. Thus, employing her authority as Leonis's legal guardian, Riselia used her master key to enter his room…only to find it empty, with the window open.

"Oh no, Regina! Leo got kidnapped!"

"Calm down, Lady Selia, we can check where he is using the terminal's guardian function."

Thanks to Regina, they were able to follow after Leonis in a vehicle. However, based on the situation, it certainly didn't look like an abduction.

"It kind of feels like…they're on a date," Riselia muttered sullenly.

"If I had to say, they appear more like siblings," Regina commented.

"But I'm the big sister here!" protested Riselia.

"Why are you acting like it's a competition? Besides, who even is that girl?"

"I don't know. Leo just said she's an old friend…"

"Hmm… He's a ten-year-old. Has he even lived long enough to have 'old' friends?" Regina wondered with suspicion. "Well, anyway, it doesn't look like she's kidnapped him, so that's good."

"N-no, it isn't!" Riselia complained. "I'm Leo's guardian; I have to make sure this acquaintance of his isn't a bad influence!"

"Yes, yes, whatever you say, Lady Selia…," Regina muttered, looking down at her terminal. "Oh, they're going into a mall."

"Let's go after them!" Without waiting for reply, Riselia hurried off.

"Ah, Lady Selia, wait for me…!"

◆

The Seventh Assault Garden's second block was known as the Old Town. Unlike the Central Garden's high-rise buildings, it was a cramped, narrow area full of modest wooden residences. Most of its inhabitants were dressed in slightly strange clothes that resembled long skirts. This was the traditional garb of the Sakura Orchid, a proud island nation that existed off the continent's coast for three hundred years.

Some of the Seventh Assault Garden's blocks were used as relocation facilities for refugees who had lost their homes to the Void invasion. The Old Town was one such place.

Walking this exotic part of the Seventh were one adolescent girl and a large dog.

"I'm sorry, Fluffymaru, but the rules say I need to keep you on a leash during walks," the blue-haired young woman said apologetically, holding up the leash in question.

"Woof!" the black canine barked at her in response.

Sakuya Sieglinde was a girl who hailed from the Sakura Orchid. She was the eighteenth platoon's ace striker and held the record for slaying large Void specimens. Recently, she'd started taking a stray dog she'd discovered loitering near the Hræsvelgr dorm on walks through this area, her second home.

"I can't let you into the dorms, but maybe I can keep you here at the estate."

Sakuya stopped silently in front of the imposing gate that barred entry to an imposing structure. She pushed on it and it gave way with surprising ease. The steel thing looked old, but it had a mana-driven biometric authentication system.

Sakuya stepped onto the premises, where a Sakura Orchid–style garden, teeming with greenery, greeted her. These weren't environmentally tuned trees that used water filtered from the ocean, but transplanted natural ones that previously grew in the Sakura Orchid's fields and mountains. They had a different air to them compared to artificial shrubbery.

"Wait for a moment. I'll talk things over with Lord Raiou," Sakuya explained, tying the leash around one of the trees.

The dog obediently sprawled itself on the ground.

"Good boy…" Sakuya pat the animal gently on the head.

Just as she was about to enter the dwelling proper…

"Prepare yourself, Princess Sakuya…!"

"Prepaaaare yourselllllllf!"

…The ground around suddenly rose up, and two small black-clad figures sprung out with katanas in hand.

"Holy Sword, Activate—Raikirimaru!"

Sakuya promptly summoned her Holy Sword, manifesting the katana that represented her inner power. A blade wrapped in tendrils of electricity took shape in her hands.

"Thunderclap!"

Sakuya stomped on the ground lightly, and then vanished like a puff of smoke. Her two assailants' blades caught only empty air. Lightning sparked against their blades, leaving a charred, ionized scent. Sakuya had hopped behind the pair of assailants in the blink of an eye.

"The first stage of acceleration. Just slightly slower than sound, I'd say."

Raikirimaru cleaved through the air with a flash, flicking the two attackers' katanas out of their hands. The duo looked on in amazement.

"…!"

"No waaaay!"

"Eika, Kuroyuki, that's enough!" A thundering voice echoed through the courtyard, and the two in black froze. An old, white-haired man had appeared in front of the estate. "You've improved, Princess Sakuya…"

"It's been some time, Lord Raiou," Sakuya replied, her Holy Sword disappearing as she bowed her head respectfully toward him.

◆

"Truly, you look more and more like Princess Setsura with every passing day."

Sitting at a porch before the garden's large lake, the white-haired man, Raiou, smiled affectionately as he gazed at Sakuya sipping tea.

"Really? I might have let my hair grow a little…," Sakuya answered as she silently placed the teacup on the floor. "But Setsura was very pretty."

"You are, too, Princess Sakuya!"

"That's right, yes!"

The two girls who had attacked Sakuya earlier now enthusiastically offered their praise. Eika and Kuroyuki were daughters to the Murakumo, a

clan of armed retainers that served the Sakura Orchid's royal house. Raiou had taken them in after they had lost their parents to the Voids.

Raiou himself was a retainer to the old royal house, and had been Sakuya's swordsmanship instructor since she was young. Sakuya had since awakened to her Holy Sword and become stronger than him, but she still frequented his estate from time to time to request his tutelage.

"Incidentally, Princess Sakuya, what about that dog over there?" Raiou asked, gazing at Blackas, who was sprawled out on the veranda.

"Oh, that's Fluffymaru the Black."

"Woof, woof!"

"Heh-heh-heh. You like that name, don't you?"

Blackas shook his head, prompting Sakuya to pat him gently.

"H-he doesn't bite?"

"H-he doesn't bark?"

Eika and Kuroyuki asked their questions with evident curiosity.

Sakuya nodded. "Don't worry. He's surprisingly docile. Here, eat this." She gently held up a rice ball in front of Blackas's nose. The dog sniffed it a few times before chomping down on the food with his large jaws.

"Hmm, he looks less like a dog and more like a dignified wolf to me," Raiou remarked quietly, seemingly impressed with the animal, before returning his gaze to Sakuya. "So you come to me with some question regarding this beast?"

"I've been wondering if I could care for Fluffymaru the Black here in this estate. Keeping him in the academy's dorms is a bit problematic," Sakuya explained.

"I don't mind, but…" Raiou's eyes narrowed as he gazed fixedly into Blackas's golden ones.

Growing a little uneasy, Sakuya asked, "Lord Raiou?"

After a short pause, Raiou looked up and shook his head.

"If I may be so forward, Princess Sakuya, I don't think anyone can hope to own this proud creature."

"…Huh?" Sakuya turned to look at Blackas, her expression betraying surprise.

"I'm certain this wolf is a born king. It has the countenance of a sovereign," Raiou stated.

"…I see," Sakuya muttered. "You weren't just some wild dog, were you, Fluffymaru?"

"Woof." Blackas nodded solemnly.

Since her infancy, Sakuya had always trusted Raiou's opinion and outlook. So if he said she couldn't hope to own this animal, it was unquestionably true.

“Very well. Then I’ll simply do whatever I can to protect you from the academy’s hunting patrol,” Sakuya declared, gently patting Blackas’s back.

Raiou then directed a sharp gaze at her. “Princess Sakuya. Certainly, you didn’t come here just for that?”

“…No,” Sakuya admitted. “I had a feeling you’d catch on.”

Raiou glanced at Eika and Kuroyuki, wordlessly asking them to leave. The two silently obliged.

After a breath, Sakuya began to explain. “It seems people with the same power as me are beginning to appear.”

“…The same power as you, Princess?”

“Yes. Demon Swords.”

Demon Swords were a power different from that granted by the planet, the Holy Swords. They housed a dark and diabolical strength. Sakuya came to possess one when she was six.

She would never forget how it happened. It was the same day the Voids destroyed the Sakura Orchid. Sakuya’s heart burned with anger over the loss of her parents and sister, and it was then that someone had appeared before her. An eerie shadow that called itself the goddess’s apostle.

The specter reached its hand out to Sakuya, and said, “*If you desire power, embrace the emptiness.*”

Oddly enough, Sakuya felt no fear. It wasn’t a question of yes or no, for there was no reason to deny the offer. And on that day, Sakuya had been granted the power of a Demon Sword and became a vengeful, demonic swordswoman.

Wielding the weapon had gradually corrupted her body with the power of the Voids. Yet even knowing this, Sakuya submitted herself and used the Demon Sword’s strength to cut the Voids down.

I need all the might I can gather, if I’m going to kill that man.

The man who took her parents, her sister, and her homeland from her was called Shardark Void Lord, a humanoid Void.

Seeing the cold, sharp light that filled Sakuya’s eyes, Raiou regarded her with a pained expression. “I understand. The Murakumo have been putting all their efforts into investigating the rumors.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” Sakuya bowed her head to the old man. As the two continued speaking over the matter, the black wolf sitting on the veranda listened in, its ears perked upright at attention.

◆

Leaving her sister behind, Elfiné returned to the Seventh Assault Garden and called a particular individual. They chose to meet in a coffee shop in a large commercial building in the Central Garden. Few people were sitting at the tables at this time of day, so Elfiné didn’t need to worry about being overheard.

The memory device her sister gave her was full of details about experiments the Phillet Company was conducting in cooperation with the military.

Forcibly evolving the power of the Holy Swords to allow humankind to transcend into its second phase…

According to the data, the Phillet Company was administering medicine to subjects and had been running multiple tests, including mental manipulations. These procedures went on to shatter the subjects' psyches beyond all repair. Ultimately, the experiments did not yield the desired results.

This is clearly insane.

The power of a Holy Sword was linked to the wielder's soul and psyche. As a Holy Swordsman matured, so did their weapon. The opposite was also true, however. A traumatizing incident could make one lose some or all of their Holy Sword's abilities.

I'm the perfect example of that, Elfiné thought with a self-deprecating smile. She reached for her glass of water.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

Elfiné turned around at the question. There she found a large young man with short red hair. It was Liat Guinness, the Holy Swordsman who had been dispatched by Excalibur Academy to the Sixth Assault Garden, and had only recently been relieved of that duty. He'd accompanied the expedition to the tundra, guarding those excavating the ice block.

Six months ago, he had been the captain of the seventh platoon. The very same squad Elfiné had also been a part of. She had last seen him during the Holy Light Festival.

"Sorry for calling you out of nowhere like that," Elfiné apologized.

"It's fine. I still see myself as your captain."

"Thank you."

Liat sat down in the seat opposite Elfiné's. "So what is it you wanted to ask me about?"

"Yes…" Elfiné took a deep breath before going further. "Have you heard about the recent incidents of Holy Swords going out of control at the academy?"

Liat's expression stiffened for a moment. "…Where did you hear about that?"

"Who do you take me for?" Elfiné questioned dryly.

"The seventh platoon's…all-seeing witch. That's what we used to call you," Liat answered, shrugging as if he'd given up.

Someone had taken over the failed D Project's experiments and continued them here in the Seventh Assault Garden within Excalibur Academy.

In order to confirm what her sister had told her, Elfiné had used the Astral Garden to access the administration bureau and analyze the data.

Then she discovered that the Holy Swords of several students had gone out of control over the last few weeks for unknown reasons.

Elfiné assumed that, as part of the executive committee, Liat might be privy to something. Evidently, her hunch was correct.

"Yes, there have been more than a few occurrences recently where students have lost control of their Holy Swords. It was brought to our attention over at the executive committee."

"And the administration bureau isn't going to go public about it?"

"No. It would just cause needless concern among the civilians."

"Right…" Elfiné could understand that decision. Holy Swordsmen had to be viewed as heroes who defended people from the Voids. Losing that trust could inspire major civil unrest.

"Has the bureau determined the cause behind this?" Elfiné asked.

"They say it's currently under investigation. I don't know the details myself. Until recently, I was stationed on the Sixth, after all. Some are speculating its mental shock from having witnessed Stampedes, or maybe the after-effects of a Void mental attack."

Roughly two months ago, the Seventh Assault Garden had weathered a Void Stampede. For many students, it was their first real battle against the Voids. In light of that, the rise in unstable emotions wasn't surprising.

"That reminds me…," Liat began. "All the ones who lost control said something about hearing a voice."

Elfiné knit her brow. "…A voice?"

"Yes, they claimed a goddess spoke to them in their heads."

"A goddess's…voice…"

"Auditory hallucinations could be a symptom. That's about all I know, though. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you, but this is all confidential information for the executive committee."

"Yes, I'm aware. Thank you, Liat," Elfiné replied, bowing her head to him gratefully.

So Excalibur Academy's administration bureau is involved with the D Project, but… The "goddess" Liat mentioned weighed on Elfiné's mind. I'll have to dig a little more and see if the Phillet Company is still connected.

CHAPTER 3
THE STAR OF CALAMITY

“It’s very cool indoors,” Veira observed offhandedly.

“…Do not do anything else that might make you stand out like that!” Leonis firmly warned her.

“Fine, fine,” she answered with an amused smile.

The two Dark Lords stepped into the Seventh Assault Garden’s largest commercial complex. Its underground section functioned as a gigantic grocery store, which would single-handedly serve as the Central Garden’s supply line in case of emergency.

Its surface level boasted an assortment of businesses, but the structure’s real highlight was its top floor, which contained a leisure facility. It had a movie theater, of course, but also an arcade center, a concert hall, an aquarium, a spa, a casino, a rooftop amusement park, and a large pool.

“Oooh, this place is impressive. It’s nothing like Necrozoa,” Veira said cheerily. “That place was gloomy.”

“Keep your thoughts to yourself,” Leonis snapped indignantly. “All the floors above are for recreation. You can spend the whole day here and still not see everything.”

“Why are you bragging about this place? It’s not like you built it.”

“Well, it’s part of my kingdom. Is there anywhere you’d like to go in particular?”

“Do you come here often?” Veira inquired.

“…Well, no. I can’t visit alone,” Leonis conceded, awkwardly averting his gaze. Being a ten-year-old, Leonis wasn’t permitted to enter places like this without a legal guardian to escort him.

Veira cocked her head to one side. “You just said this place is your kingdom.”

“…Shut up. Let’s go,” Leonis said and stomped off, his face slightly reddened.

◆

The two of them decided to have a look around the sprawling complex. The lord of all dragons proved to be quite curious about humanity’s ideas of fun.

“What’s that, Leo?”

“A measuring instrument for gauging one’s strength. I’ve seen something similar to it in the academy’s training facility.”

The object Veira pointed at was similar in form to the Void Simulator Leonis destroyed early in his days at the academy. This one seemed to be optimized for amusement purposes.

“It looks fun. Maybe I should try it?” Veira wondered aloud.

“…Don’t! You’ll definitely break it!” Leonis pulled his fellow Dark Lord back just as she was about to reach for the machine.

They passed by the arcade and the casino before entering the zoo. Veira eyed the lizards in the reptile exhibit with affection and excitement.

“Look, Leo, they have lizards! Cute, right?”

“…Are they?”

Veira seemed to have a fondness for reptiles, despite getting enraged whenever someone implied she was similar to one.

Dragons certainly are a mystery.

“Maybe I should take one with me back home to the Demon Dragon’s Mountain Range,” Veira mused.

“Don’t take what isn’t yours,” Leonis scolded. No sooner had he done so than a twinge of loneliness filled Veira’s eyes.

Right. The dragons of the Demon Dragon’s Mountain Range are extinct now…

Veira’s species had been wiped from the face of the planet. She was the last of her kind.

“Were you thinking of raising it into your minion?” Leonis asked.

“…Yes. If I trained it, it might make for a fine Firedrake,” Veira replied, a bit morosely.

“I don’t think that’s how it wo—”

“I know.” Veira ran her finger gently over the lizard’s back. “Let’s keep going. What are you going to show me next?”

The pair left the zoo and continued to the next floor. However, at the entrance to the passage connecting the levels…

“Excuse me, you two.”

“Who, us?” Leonis said, turning around.

Whoever this was, they had quite the nerve to address two Dark Lords so brazenly. The person who called for them was a robed woman who kept her face behind a veil. Such attire was standard among sorcerers. She was sitting in front of a small table lined with an assortment of tools.

“Do you want me to check for your affinity for each other?” the woman offered.

“Oh, some kind of divination. I’m surprised it’s still practiced nowadays…” Leonis shrugged, his expression a bit exasperated.

Naturally there had been magic users that foretold the future a thousand years ago. Most of them were petty human sorcerers. Leonis knew the goddess who was graced with true future sight, so their prophecies always struck him as child’s play.

Veira, however, seemed interested. “My affinity for Leo? Mmm. That sounds like fun,” she said, taking a seat at the table.

Our affinity? What’s the point of even asking, it’s obviously terrible, Leonis thought bitterly, recalling the many lethal battles he and Veira had shared.

The robed woman brought her hands together and spoke gravely, “Holy Sword, Horoscope—Activate.”

Particles of light gathered in the air, forming a small globe. A series of luminous dots swirled around it like stars.

I see. She’s using her Holy Sword…

This was probably a data analysis Holy Sword, similar to Elfiné’s Eye of the Witch. Leonis recalled that Excalibur Academy actively gathered Holy Sword users of this type to predict Void appearances and forecast the weather.

Horoscope must be a type of augury that reads the stars.

It was an orthodox type of prediction that sought to ascertain the future through the position of the stars.

“What’s your name, miss?” the fortune-teller inquired.

“Veira Greater Dragon,” the crimson-haired girl replied unashamedly.

“…Hmm. An unusual name.” The fortune-teller furrowed her brow slightly. “And what star were you born under?”

“The Dragon Lord Star, of course.”

“The Dragon Lord, hmm. Tyranny and domination. A star of chaos…”

Glowing symbols began running across the surface of the sphere floating in midair. The fortune-teller turned to Leonis next.

“And you?”

“Leonis Magnus. I was born under…I believe it was the Great Sage Star?” he said, forced to state something from his time as a human.

“The Great Sage. The star of heroes and those of valor…”

Different shimmering characters streamed across the globe, intersecting and blending with the first row of letters.

“You two are eternal nemeses. Conflict sparks whenever you meet, and you are bound to fight to the death—huh?!” The fortune-teller’s expression stiffened with obvious astonishment as she read out the result.

“Wow. It’s surprisingly accurate,” the Dragon Lord remarked.

“It is,” agreed the Undead King.

Veira and Leonis exchanged gazes, nodding, as though impressed.

Perhaps it was wrong of me to underestimate Holy Sword divination.

“O-oh, but wait! Please! While you normally quarrel, you will form the perfect pairing when faced with a common enemy. And as you join forces, a wonderful romance may sprout between you!” the robed woman hurriedly blurted out.

“R-romance… Huh? Huuuuh?!” Veira glared at the fortune-teller imposingly.

The woman cowered, almost bursting into tears at having incurred the Dragon Lord’s wrath. “I—I’m sorry, forgive me…! B-but the horoscope says…”

“…Hmm?” Veira eyed the horoscope’s star map suspiciously.

“What’s wrong?” Leonis asked.

“…This horoscope thing, it’s weird. The stars are positioned all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

Veira ignored Leonis and spoke to the fortune-teller instead. “Tell me, are the heavens aligned incorrectly on your tool?”

“Eh? W-well, my Holy Sword reflects the real night sky.”

“Hmm…I see. Then what’s this star, then?” Veira questioned seriously, pointing at the very top of the chart surrounding the globe. “I don’t recognize it.”

“It’s the Star of Calamity,” the fortune-teller hastily answered.

“The Star of Calamity?”

“Yes… It’s a star that shines red and beckons ruin, an ill omen. A theory posits the Voids don’t come from another dimension, but actually from this heavenly body…”

As Veira listened to the fortune-teller’s explanation, her gaze remained sharply fixed on the Star of Calamity.

◆

“Perhaps the way the stars are aligned changed in the last thousand years,” Leonis suggested.

“That can’t be,” Veira refuted, sipping on a tropical drink.

They were in one of the coffee shops.

“Then maybe it was some manner of natural disaster,” speculated Leonis.

“Yes, on the level of stars falling from the sky,” Veira responded, gazing vacantly up at the ceiling.

Ah, right. Dragons revere the stars.

The heavens realigning must have been very significant to Veira.

“…Wait, Leo, did you never notice?”

“I never had much interest in the stars.”

The Undead King had ruled from his underground palace, and rarely made appearances on the surface. Besides, the skies above Necrozoa were clouded by a thick miasma, so one could hardly see anything overhead at night. And denizens of the Realm of Shadows, like Blackas and Shary, wouldn’t be privy to changes in the sky.

“I think most people would notice something like that,” Veira said, heaving an exasperated sigh. “And that star didn’t even exist a thousand years ago…”

“…The Star of Calamity, eh?”

Leonis had to admit, it was certainly a point of concern.

That fortune-teller called it an ill omen…

Leonis recalled how, during the incident on the *Hyperion*, he’d learned the secret behind Regina’s birth. She was born to be a princess of the empire, yet since she came into the world under an ominous star, she was cast out and unwanted. Instead, Duke Crystalia took her in. What’s more…

The Archsage Arakael also mentioned something strange on the verge of death.

“The world has already changed.”

“The world shall be reborn with the Star of Nothingness.”

At the time, Leonis had thought Arakael’s words to be the mad ravings on one whose soul had been consumed by Voids.

The Star of Nothingness. Perhaps I should do some research…

Veira rose to her feet, a faint smile on her lips. “Oh well. The matter of the odd star can wait. Where to next?”

“There’s an aquarium on this floor,” Leonis proposed.

“…Hmm. That does sound nice, but…” Veira cast her gaze out a nearby window. “I think I’d like to overlook your kingdom, Leo. From above.”

◆

The voice of a goddess, huh?

Liat Guinness was gone, but Elfiné remained in the café and continued her research on Demon Swords. If the intelligence she had gathered from the administration bureau was to be trusted, eight students had gone insane and lost control of their Holy Swords. All of them had experienced this auditory hallucination.

It doesn’t appear that any narcotics were used.

Upon further investigation, Elfiné discovered another point of commonality between the eight afflicted—there were records of each using an Artificial Elemental called Seraphim. This Artificial Elemental analyzed the varied power of one’s Holy Sword and prepared a more appropriate training menu for them.

A mass-produced Artificial Elemental provided by the Phillet Company…

This on its own wasn’t enough to implicate the business. It was almost the sole supplier of Artificial Elementals, and Seraphim was commonly employed by Excalibur Academy students. However, there was one thing that made Elfiné suspicious; the supply of this Artificial Elemental was temporarily suspended due to some kind of malfunction.

Elfiné sighed. “I guess that’s all I can get from a terminal.”

Erring on the side of safety, she forwarded an anonymous e-mail to the academy, alerting them about the possible danger in Seraphim’s use.

“For the rest of the data, I’ll have to source it my way…”

Elfiné closed her eyes, focusing her consciousness on the Eye of the Witch orbs she had sent into the city. She adjusted them so they would send her information upon detecting a transformation in a Holy Sword.

The D Project. A plan to forcibly evolve Holy Swords into powerful Demon Swords.

Why had such a dangerous, suspended experiment suddenly been restarted here? If Elfiné’s father… If that *monster* was involved…

As his daughter, I have a duty to stop it.

Suddenly, one of her orbs reacted.

A Holy Sword is mutating? Now?!

Elfiné focused her consciousness on the sphere sending her the signal, and the footage played out in her mind. A park came into view.

◆

"…Heh, hah… Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, I did it! My Holy Sword's power is back!"

Standing in front of a park plaza, Muselle Rhodes swung his baton lightly through the air. His mind-controlling Holy Sword, Dominion, the Staff of Absolute Obedience, had returned.

"I have been chosen. The goddess of Holy Swords has selected me!"

As the young man let out a deranged cackle, the civilians strolling by began to kneel before him one after another. With a satisfied smirk, he called up an image of Riselia and Leonis on his terminal and thrust it before the vacant-eyed people.

"Find them… The silver-haired woman and her brat. Find themmmm!"

By Muselle's order, the army of puppets shambled away.

◆

The two Dark Lords rode the elevator to the top floor. This was the highest spot in the Central Garden. From here, they could see Excalibur Academy's tower, as well as the rest of the Seventh Assault Garden.

"You dragons really do like high places, don't you?" Leonis remarked.

"Yes. Same as how you undead feel most at home below the ground," Veira said.

A bit deflated, Leonis answered, "I suppose I can't deny that."

Veira gazed down haughtily with a hand on her waist. "It's a nice view, but the wreckage here and there really spoils it," she commented.

"Those are places you and Arakael destroyed," Leonis pointed out dryly.

"I'm sure you had a hand in it, too."

"Don't try to shift the blame at me," Leonis shot back.

After taking in everything, Veira's gaze fixed on something nearby. "Say, what's that?" She pointed at a glass-covered spot on the other side of the rooftop area.

"That's a pool. A place for playing in the water."

"They have a spot just for that?" Veira questioned. "But I can see the ocean in every direction."

"Well, the seas are polluted with the Voids' miasma."

"Hmm. It sounds like people are having fun in there."

"Hmph. I'd assume they're holding some manner of festivity."

"Like a carnival? I want to see it!" Veira exclaimed before seizing Leonis by the arm and dragging him after her.

"H-hey…!"

There were floating boards bobbing in the pool's surface like islands, and kids swam around them. They appeared embroiled in a savage battle, armed with water guns.

“This doesn’t look like a festival…more like a war,” Veira observed.

“It’s a sport. You use weapons to fight over the water.”

“Oh, that sounds fun. ♪ ”

Seeing the savage combat likely tickled Veira’s aggressive draconic instincts. A savage, carnivorous smile spread over her face.

“Fight me with those things, Leo!” she declared, thrusting a finger in front of Leonis’s nose.

“You just went on a rampage the other day, you fool!” Leonis chided her.

“I told you I can’t remember that. That doesn’t count.”

“Well, Blackas and I certainly remember it! I’ll have you know I had to destroy Zolgstar Mezekis to defeat you, and it was a lot of trouble to obtain it!”

Leonis had gone through so much trouble to beat Veira, and she couldn’t recall it in the slightest. It seemed absurd. To him, fighting a fellow Dark Lord was the first time he’d been genuinely excited in a long time.

“Why should I care? Or what, are you scared of meeting me in battle again?”

“…Excuse *you*?” Leonis growled, directing a glare at Veira.

“I’m disappointed. Evidently, you don’t just look like a child, but you act like one, too. Where has your Dark Lord’s spirit gone?” Veira said with a theatrical, disappointed shrug.

“Stooping to petty provocations, Dragon Lord?” Leonis asked, his shoulders trembling with anger and an aura of darkness billowing from him. The Undead King couldn’t let that insult stand.

“Very well. I’ll use all of my powers to make you bend the knee.”

Leonis had always been an aggressive, belligerent Dark Lord, after all.

◆

While the pair of Dark Lords squabbled, two girls watched over them from the shadows.

“Th-this is definitely a date!” Riselia squeaked. “And improper relations between members of the opposite gender are prohibited by academy regulations!”

“Lady Selia, there’s nothing unsuitable about what they’ve been doing so far…,” Regina pointed out.

“S-still! Leo’s just a ten-year-old!”

“Yes, yes, Lady Selia. I’m sure you’re just sad because someone’s hogging his attention.”

“N-no…,” Riselia denied feebly. “I’m just…worried. As his guardian.” Angry, she puffed up her cheeks. Riselia was typically a responsible, bright student, but whenever Leonis was involved she became strangely overprotective.

“Ah, looks like they’re going to do a water gun fight at the pool next,” Regina pointed out.

“What? But Leo can’t swim that well…,” Riselia said with concern in her eyes.

“…Uh, this might be pretty bad, Lady Selia,” Regina suddenly whispered gravely.

Riselia looked to her friend with clear anxiety. “Huh?”

“I get the feeling that girl might try to seduce the kid with a sexy swimsuit…,” Regina explained.

“L-Leo isn’t a pervy boy! I mean, he’s still a child…”

Regina shook her head. “Oh, no, Lady Selia, ten is plenty old enough for a boy.”

“Y-you think…?” Riselia then recalled the moment that the girl first appeared. “Sh-she was dressed in some very…extreme clothes…”

“Well, your costume in the haunted café was pretty intense, too,” Regina stated offhandedly.

“R-Regina!” Riselia protested. Blushing, she punched the other girl on the shoulder a few times.

“O-ow, stop that, Lady Selia, it hurts—Oh, right!” Regina clapped her hands as if remembering something.

“What is it?”

“This could be a great chance, Lady Selia!”

Despite the proclamation, Riselia remained dubious.

“A water gun fight!” said Regina, pointing at the large building past the glass pane. “We don’t have to sneak around and follow them like this. Just challenge that girl to a battle fair and square, and win the kid back!”

“A battle…fair and square…” Riselia considered it for a while.

She’s right… Sneaking around like this doesn’t suit me.

Riselia was the proud daughter of House Crystalia. Tackling challenges like these head-on was a matter of honor!

“…Yes, you’re right. This is a good chance.”

Besides, a water gun fight was a sport that required comprehensive athletic ability. Riselia could use this to assess that crimson-haired girl’s strengths.

“Yes, that’s right!” Regina nodded excitedly, her pigtails swaying rhythmically. “Let’s go rent some swimsuits. ♪ ”

“Regina, you’re not just doing this because you enjoy egging me on, are you?”

“I—I would never! Come one, are you content to let that woman sink her claws into the kid?”

“…L-let’s hurry!”

Whenever Leonis was involved, Riselia’s good judgment took a nosedive.

CHAPTER 4
DEMON SWORD RAMPAGE

Leonis swiftly donned swim trunks in a changing room adjacent to the pool. He'd summoned the pair of black shorts from the Realm of Shadows. These were the ones Riselia had bought when she was teaching Leonis how to swim on the *Hyperion*.

There were already many spectators watching the water gun match underway in the pool. Young boys, albeit older than Leonis, freely jumped along the floating boards like stepping-stones as they squirted one another. They were all very athletic; probably Excalibur Academy students.

As Leonis observed the heated contest, a strange thought crossed his mind.

There was such a big catastrophe, but they're so peaceful.

He didn't just mean the recent chaos with Veira. Just two months ago, Arakael Degradios had led a Void Stampede, and damage from the attack was still obvious. Yet the people of the Seventh Assault Garden still managed to indulge in fun.

Maybe it's just humanity's stubborn sense of pride at work.

Most of their habitable land had been taken by the Voids, and they were facing extinction. Still, they refused to yield to despair, adapting to form a superior culture and technology where they could distract themselves with this kind of entertainment.

Perhaps that was humankind's obstinance; its pride.

I suppose that's one thing that hasn't changed in the last thousand years.

They may have been the weakest species, incapable of breathing fire or soaring through the sky, but they had the resolve and determination to survive even in the face of ruination. And it's because the Dark Lords' Armies underestimated those qualities that they ultimately lost to humans.

Leonis sank deep into thought while leaning against a transplanted palm tree.

"Kept you waiting, huh, Leo?"

Veira finally appeared, clad in a swimsuit.

"…!"

Leonis couldn't help but swallow hard. Veira had rented a black bikini. Her crimson hair wavered in the breeze like flickering flames. Her bust was moderately sized, the curvature of her stomach was elegant and attractive, and her white legs were long and shapely.

Those nearby snuck glances at the Dragon Lord's perfect form.

“What? Entranced by the sight of me?” Veira asked, a roguish smile on her lips.

Leonis looked away and muttered over his shoulder, “Hmph, you’re a fool to think I ever would.”

“Oh. Cheeky, aren’t you?” Veira said, catching Leonis’s neck under her arm.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Leonis croaked, feeling her breasts press softly against him. “Ugh, nnng, s-stop… Can’t…breathe…”

“Oh? Is the Undead King gasping for breath?” Veira snickered viciously. “A human body is so inconvenient.”

“…Damn…you…!”

Leonis thrashed fruitlessly, his immature strength too meager to shake her off. But then…

“Stop bullying him!”

Leonis looked up in surprise.

“…Miss Selia?”

Curiously, Riselia and Regina had appeared, clad in their own bikinis. Riselia had a modest white one, while Regina wore a mint-green suit with a stylish design.

“I won’t let you bully Leo any longer!” Riselia declared, glaring at Veira.

The crimson-haired girl released Leonis and met Riselia’s gaze unflinchingly.

“Oh, you’re concerned for him?” Veira asked with a smirk. “Aren’t you a cute little minion.”

Riselia seemed to wince for a moment at the other girl’s confident attitude.

Now that he was free, Leonis inquired, “What are you doing here, Miss Selia?”

“I thought she kidnapped you, Leo,” Riselia explained, frowning. “I couldn’t even get in touch with you.”

“Sorry about that…”

Everything had happened so suddenly that Leonis had left his communication terminal in his room.

Veira scoffed. “So, what, you came here to take Leo back? Well, I’m sorry, but at the moment—”

“I—I challenge you to a match!” Riselia cried, pointing fixedly at Veira.

“Wha?!” Leonis exclaimed in shock.

Veira narrowed her eyes at Riselia for one long moment. “You’re demanding a battle with me?”

“That’s right. If I win, you have to let Leo go.”

“…Hmm,” Veira eyed Riselia as though she were prey.

A normal human would have passed out from the sheer intimidating pressure of a dragon’s glare, but Riselia stood resolute.

“Go, go, Lady Selia!” Regina whispered her encouragement while hiding behind her mistress’s back.

“I like your pluck, girl. You’re amusing. I’ll take you up on that challenge,” Veira said confidently, her hands resting on her waist in an indomitable pose. “Come at me, all three of you at once.”

“…What? But that’s…,” Leonis attempted to protest.

This was a match between Dark Lords. If Leonis relied on numbers to best Veira, it would besmirch his reputation.

“It’s a handicap for me. After all, I have an overwhelming advantage,” Veira boasted.

“Nng…,” Leonis groaned.

The Dragon Lord’s bluster was not without merit, however. Leonis had a ten-year-old’s body, and he was a bad swimmer, at that.

“Or what, is your minion going to drag you down?”

“…What did you just say?” Leonis was aware Veira was provoking him, but he felt angry all the same. As Riselia’s master, Leonis couldn’t let this insult to his favored minion stand. “…You will rue ever speaking those words, Veira,” he swore quietly.

“Then it’s decided,” Veira stated, casting a fearless smile at her fellow Dark Lord. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun. I’ll have you begging for mercy, Leo.”

◆

Riselia swiftly completed registering their participation in the next match and returned to the poolside. Once those playing finished their turn, they would be able to use the pool for their battle.

“I’m sorry you got caught up in this,” Leonis apologized.

Riselia shook her head. “Don’t be. I’m the one who challenged her. Besides, how were you going to beat her when you can’t swim?”

“That was a bit rash of me,” he admitted. “But sometimes you can’t back down.”

Leonis had his Dark Lord’s honor to consider, especially because his eternal nemesis was involved. Running had never been an option.

“Boys will be boys,” Riselia stated, smiling for some reason as she patted Leonis on the head. “Don’t worry, Leo. I’ll protect you.”

“And I’ll be your sniper, kid,” Regina added, striking a pose with her rented water gun.

“I’ll be counting on you, Miss Regina,” Leonis said.

“I know you’re used to rifles, but isn’t it your first time using a pistol?” Riselia questioned.

“Yeah, it’s pretty different from the Drag Striker,” Regina commented.

A water gun's effective range was a paltry five meters. One wouldn't be able to shoot down the opponent unless they were in close range. Of course, a mere squirt wouldn't defeat the mighty Dragon Lord, but Veira had promised she'd abide by the rules of the match and keep her power suppressed.

Although overbearing and tyrannical, Veira was no coward or cheat. Leonis trusted her fully in that sense.

"Do you know how to use a water gun, kid?" Regina asked him.

"No, it's my first time wielding a weapon like this," Leonis replied.

"Well, let this reliable big sister impart her wisdom upon you!"

As the group's resident sharpshooter, Regina guided Leonis on the use of a water gun. Leonis had read in books that firearms only came to be sixty-four years ago, when humanity first acquired the power of Holy Swords. Essentially, normal guns and water guns had been modeled after ranged Holy Swords.

Such a baffling story.

Holy Swords in the form of firearms had somehow been granted to humankind before the concept of such armaments ever existed. If a Holy Sword was the manifestation of a human's soul, why had some taken forms alien to their owners?

What were Holy Swords, really? Leonis would eventually need to resolve that mystery.

◆

"These things make for some pretty wobbly footing."

Leonis and the others stood on the floating boards distributed unevenly around the pool. They had to knock the other team off their footing, but they weren't allowed to directly touch anyone. A contestant could only topple another using their water gun. Knocking an enemy into the water earned them a point. There were apparently a few other scoring rules, but the Artificial Elemental flying above took care of that automatically.

"Try shifting your weight; it'll help you keep your balance. See?" Riselia instructed.

While Leonis wobbled unsteadily, Riselia demonstrated her athletic skills.

"Hey, could you look this way, Leo?"

"What's wrong?" Leonis asked. When he turned to look…

Om. ♪

…Riselia lightly nibbled on his earlobe.

"Miss Selia?!"

"I'm replenishing my mana," Riselia explained with a mischievous grin. "This is an important battle, so I have to take this seriously."

"…Y-you can't do that in public!" Leonis scolded, holding on to his flushed earlobe.

Am I imagining things, or has she been getting more and more aggressive with her biting lately?

“Are we ready to go, Lady Selia?” Regina asked.

“Yes…” Riselia nodded, glaring at Veira, who was occupying one of the opposite side’s floating boards. “Let’s go with the eighteenth platoon’s usual formation…”

“Right.”

“Understood.”

As was their usual arrangement, Riselia assumed the vanguard. If this was a practice bout, they would’ve also had Sakuya’s frontal assault power and Elfiné’s data analysis.

A long electric beeping filled the air, marking the start of the fight.

Bwoosh!

Riselia kicked against the board she was standing on, jumping away.

Bwoosh, bwoosh, bwoosh, bwoosh…!

The rhythmical splashing sound of her agile hops echoed across the pool. Using her powerful Vampire Queen strength, she swiftly closed the distance with Veira.

“So it’s a melee you want. Well, you’re brave, I’ll grant you that much,” Veira said, wearing a ferocious grin.

The Dragon Lord took a deep, long breath. The water around her trembled. Ripples spread across the pool’s surface. Students watching from the sidelines started whispering nervously to each other.

Veira’s going to try for the brute force approach…

They were up against the tyrannical Dragon Lord. She was never the type to strategize or pull tricks. What spurred her on was the pride of a dragon, the greatest life-form the world has ever known.

Riselia hopped over to the board Veira was occupying.

“How valiant. Leo doesn’t deserve a minion like you,” Veira remarked, casually holding up her water gun. Out flew a jet of water, but it greatly missed its mark.

“Looks like you’re not used to using a water gun!” Riselia observed.

“It makes for a good handicap,” Veira answered, unconcerned.

Riselia fired back at close range. Veira evaded it by hopping to another board, however, her crimson hair trailing through the air behind her.

“I’m going to have to politely ask you to fall into the water—Drag Howl!”

Regina fired her water gun in rapid succession. Being a trained markswoman, one of her shots struck Veira’s leg.

“…Whoa. You’re good!” the Dragon Lord exclaimed.

Frustrated, Regina grumbled, “It didn’t finish her off…”

Her attack had found purchase, but Veira remained standing.

“Now it’s my turn!” Veira announced, raising her leg up and then stomping down. The action created a large wave, which surged forward and washed over Regina’s board, capsizing it.

“Huh, wai… Aaah!”

Letting out an adorable yelp, Regina plummeted into the pool. The birdlike Artificial Elemental flying overhead signaled that a point had just been scored.

"…How dare you do that to Regina!" Riselia shot several times in retaliation.

"Ha-ha-ha, where are you aiming?" the Dragon Lord taunted as she gracefully hopped from one floating platform to the next.

"Don't forget about me!" Leonis exclaimed as he moved around Veira.

"Huh?!"

The boy provided covering fire (water?) to support Riselia. However, his blasts were out of the gun's effective range and splashed ineffectually against Veira's swimsuit.

"You're in for it now, Leo!" Veira shouted spitefully, launching a counterattack.

Leonis quickly jumped away to avoid her barrage.

"Over here!" Riselia boldly plunged forward, shooting rapidly.

Veira's eyes glinted gold and she leaped back. The board sank in the wake of her landing, and a pillar of water splashed up, swallowing Riselia's blasts.

"…N-no way!"

"This is how a dragon fights."

As the column of water washed over Riselia, knocking her off balance, Veira tore through it. She thrust the muzzle of her water gun at Riselia's stomach and pulled the trigger, sending the argent-haired girl into the pool, the spray of water splattering against her body.

"Go on, back to the surface with you. I'm not done toying with you yet," Veira said, looking down at Riselia with her hands on her waist.

"…!"

Riselia kicked off against the bottom of the pool and hopped onto the nearest board.

"You're being careless, Veira!" Leonis shouted, firing at her legs.

As she evaded, the Dragon Lord replied, "That's not enough to strike me!"

Leonis sneered. "Yes, and that's fine."

"…Huh?"

"I'm the one you should be worried about! Hyaaaaah!" Regina had resurfaced and fired, unleashing a shot at a specific point on Veira's body.

Leonis's attack was only meant to lure his opponent into position.

"You think firing upon me from that distance would—Huh?"

At first Veira smiled with confidence, but then her eyes widened in shock. The strings of her top came undone and fluttered down to her feet.

"…Wait… Huuuh?!" Veira hurriedly covered her breasts, her face flushed.

Regina's shot had struck the knot holding up Veira's top and successfully undid it. "All right!" she cheered.

“Y-you fool… Ugh!” Veira huffed, her cheeks red with embarrassment. Her crimson, burning hair stood up on end. Suddenly, a gust blew through the pool, flipping the nearby boards.

“…Whoa… Veira, wait…!” Leonis lost his footing and sank unceremoniously into the water. “Gah… Bwfha, bah…!” The boy thrashed helplessly. Water clogged his throat, obstructing his breathing.

“Leo!”

Immediately, Riselia dove into the pool. She wrapped her arms around Leonis’s drowning body and led him back to the surface.

“Leo, are you okay?!”

“Pfha…! I’m fine… Though I did swallow a little water…,” Leonis responded, still coughing.

“…Thank goodness,” Riselia said, clearly relieved. “Don’t push yourself, okay?”

“Hey, that’s against the rules!” Regina protested.

“My apologies… But what you did wasn’t fair either!” Veira snapped back at her, still red. “…Fine. You don’t have to count that one. Let’s restart the match…”

No sooner did Veira offer a hand to help Riselia out of the water than a scream echoed from the pool’s entrance.

“—ound you… I finally found you, Riseliaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

◆

What’s this all about?

Leonis looked in the direction of the shout and spotted a figure approaching. It was a blond young man in an Excalibur Academy uniform. His features were usually quite handsome, but now they were contorted with hatred.

I remember him from somewhere. Isn’t he…?

“Muselle Rhodes…?” Riselia whispered his name after regarding him in silent shock for a moment.

Right, that was it.

The man who was foolish enough to challenge Leonis to a duel the day he’d entered Excalibur Academy.

“Obey my voice and will, slaves! Dominion!” Muselle bellowed, swinging his baton overhead.

The next moment, the surrounding people went stiff…and then turned to look at Leonis and the others with wooden, mechanical motions.

“…What’s going on?” Leonis asked.

“That’s his Holy Sword. It can control people…,” Riselia replied with a frown.

Leonis did recall Muselle commanding a few girls with that baton.

“But I thought he lost his Holy Sword after you beat him…,” Regina said.

Visibly disturbed, Riselia replied, “Yes. What’s more, his Holy Sword could only ever dominate people who consented to being controlled by him in the first place.”

“Hmm, I don’t really understand what’s happening here, but… This one must have quite the backbone to interrupt a match between you and me, Leo,” stated an amused Veira. She slowly lifted her finger, aiming in Muselle’s direction.

Leonis hurriedly stopped her. “—Wait, Veira.”

“What? I’m just sweeping away this piece of trash.”

“I told you not to do anything that’ll make you stand out,” Leonis reminded, chanting a levitation spell and landing on top of one of the boards. “You’re in my kingdom. Abide by my rules.”

The tyrannical Dragon Lord could easily blow these controlled people to smithereens. However, Riselia would be saddened and furious if Leonis let that happen.

Veira cocked an eyebrow in displeasure for a moment, but acquiesced. “Fine. Let’s do this your way.” She shrugged and placed her hands on her waist.

“Ah-ha-ha, Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha, they made a laughingstock of me, kill them, kill, kiiiiill!” Muselle cackled as he swung Dominion down. The vacant-eyed horde lunged at the group in response.

“What is this, Lady Selia?! Some kind of grudge?!” Regina shouted.

“…It looks like he’s out of his mind!” Riselia kicked a group of men who had jumped at her, knocking them down into the water with a splash.

“There’s more of them coming!” Regina warned her.

“Leo, we can’t hurt them; they’re civilians…!” Riselia said.

Grimacing, Leonis answered. “I know. Mesta Mord!”

Black hands sprung out of Leonis’s shadow, pulling those charging him down into the pool. This resulted in multiple large splashes that shook the boards.

It’s a good thing we’re in a pool; it lets us dispatch them safely. But…

Leonis cast a suspicious glance at the man swinging his baton near the entrance. The fact that he was using civilians for this was a touch troublesome, but such weak opponents posed no threat to Leonis, or even Riselia by herself.

But then…

“Hi-hi-hi, ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kill, kill, that woman, and the brat, kill themmmm!”

“…What?”

Crack… Crack… Crack…

Dominion was beginning to elongate and grow, like the branches of a tree maturing rapidly. It looked like its tip would reach the ceiling before long.

“His Holy Sword is evolving…?” Leonis whispered in disbelief.

“—No, that’s not evolution. It’s going out of control and rampaging.”

Leonis looked up at this new voice. There he saw a glowing sphere far overhead. It was Elfiné's Holy Sword, the Eye of the Witch.

"…Miss Finé?! Why are you—?" Riselia exclaimed.

"We can talk later," Regina told her. "First, we have to stop him."

"R-right. Holy Sword—Activate!" With those words, Riselia manifested the Bloody Sword in her hands. Regina summoned her Drag Striker.

"Ooh… Ooooh…!"

"Ugh, aaagh…!"

"Aaaah…"

The people that had been knocked down into the water resurfaced and clung to the floating boards.

"Leo, you handle the people he's taken control of!" Riselia told him. "I'll go take care of Muselle!"

"Understood."

Riselia swiftly leaped forward from the platform she was on. Using her large mana reserves to boost her physical strength was a Vampire Queen ability. Her silvery hair shone with a mana glow, leaving a brilliant trail in her wake.

"I'll cover for you, Lady Selia!"

As people mindlessly threw themselves at Riselia, Regina accurately shot them down. Her shots were greatly suppressed, yet being struck by them surely still hurt. Those who were hit were knocked unconscious and fell into the pool. Leonis deployed shadow hands to drag them out of the water.

Riselia streaked across the pool like a crimson flash.

"Riseliaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Muselle Rhodes bellowed in delight. He swung his Holy Sword, which now resembled a gigantic tree. Riselia didn't falter, however.

"Haaaaaaaah!"

She made a shallow cut into her own arm as she sprinted forward. The flowing blood turned into crimson blades that severed the branches of Muselle's weapon as it bore down upon her.

"…Your fault! It's all your fault I, I, aaaaaaaaaaaah!" Muselle howled, swinging his overgrown baton.

"Muselle, calm down! Just hear me out…!" Riselia pleaded desperately, but it was to no avail.

"Ah-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha, no one can stop me! I've been chosen! I'm the goddess's chosen one!"

"…Goddess?"

For one brief moment, that word distracted Riselia… And in that split second, Muselle tried to crush her beneath his Dominion. His attempt failed, however.

"Farga!"

Booom!

Leonis loosed a spell that blasted the Holy Sword to splinters.

"Leo…!"

“Selia, he’s completely deranged right now. Don’t waste your breath trying to convince him!”

“…! Right!” Riselia nodded resolutely, holding the Bloody Sword aloft. The weapon shone like a crimson flower in bloom, and Riselia’s argent hair lit up faintly with mana.

“Hi-hi-hi, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Muselle Rhodes cackled. In the blink of an eye, his Holy Sword regenerated, now enveloped with a thick miasma.

Creak, creak, creak, creak…!

The massive branches tangled together, producing a disturbing sound reminiscent of gnashing teeth. The tree limbs enveloped Muselle’s entire body, growing at an explosive rate.

“…Ah, what…is that… That’s almost like…a Void!” **exclaimed Elfiné.**

“Riseliaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The tree limbs turned to sharp spears that thrust forward, aiming to gouge at Riselia. Still, she didn’t back down—kicking off the ground, she met the attack.

“Raging blood, frolic and cut—Bloody Storm!”

Riselia’s ice-blue eyes turned to brilliant, shining crimson. The bloody blades rotated and slashed like a tornado, cleaving through Muselle’s Holy Sword. By releasing the mana in her legs, Riselia rapidly propelled herself forward and closed in on her opponent.

“Haaaah!”

The tip of her sword penetrated the entangled branches.

“Aah, blood, the blood, it, aaaaah… It hurts, hurts, it hurts, huuuuurts!”

Muselle screamed and thrashed, having been cut across the shoulder. Riselia resumed her stance and then slashed through the branches, clearing them away.

“Muselle Rhodes. Surrender yourself peaceful—”

“Youuuuuuuuuuuu, how dare you, my Holy Swooooooord…!”

“…!”

Muselle threw himself at Riselia in his rage, perhaps hoping to throttle her with his bare hands.

Bang!

Riselia landed a powerful high kick to his head.

“Ah… Ggh… Ah… Nng…”

Muselle fell into the pool with a splash, and his eyes rolled back in their sockets. Not a moment later, his rampaging Holy Sword burst into particles of light and vanished into thin air. After confirming Muselle was no longer a threat, Riselia turned around.

“Miss Finé, can you contact the academy’s hospital ward?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m already on it,” came Elfiné’s voice from the orb above.

“…What happened to him?” wondered Riselia as she eyed Muselle’s body.

“…A Demon Sword,” Elfiné whispered, as if to answer the other girl’s question.

Riselia furrowed her brow with confusion. “Huh?”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the pool, the two Dark Lords oversaw her battle.

“Hmm, your minion’s pretty good, Leo,” Veira commented, seemingly impressed.

Leonis nodded proudly. “Hmph. Of course she is.”

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“It seems Veira the Dragon Lord was consumed by the Voids and destroyed.”

“Then that simply means she wasn’t a suitable vessel for the goddess.”

The laughter of an old, wrinkled man filled the cathedral. The flames of the candles set along the walls wavered oddly, casting shadows on a round table made of black crystal.

It was a room in the Otherworldly Castle, which existed in the interstice between worlds.

“Truthfully, that humans unearthed Veira Greater Dragon at all was unexpected.” A young man with white hair and fair features, dressed in priestly garb, was sitting opposite the old man. He shook his head with a frown. “Had she awakened in a complete form, she may have served as a worthy vessel.”

“It truly was an irregular situation, to say the least, Lord Nefakess,” the old man agreed. His bald head was oddly elongated. This was Zemein Vairel. One thousand years ago, he had served as an undead sorcerer in the service of the Undead King. “Based on the goddess’s prediction, there are *five more* Dark Lords to revive,” Zemein said. “We must seek them out and awaken them ourselves, before humanity does.”

Nefakess nodded. “Indeed. But we still don’t know where more than half of them are. On top of that, the Lord of the Seas is at the bottom of a great trench, and the Lord of Rage was consumed by the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes.”

“Which means we must revive my master, who slumbers in Necrozoa,” Zemein concluded, a dark croaking laughter rising from his throat. “The fallen hero who became the greatest of Dark Lords—Leonis Death Magnus.”

“The Undead King. Yes, he should make for a perfect vessel. He was one of the few who could match my own master, Azra-Ael, in his deep affection for the goddess. However…” Nefakess placed one of his elegant fingers over his lips. “We will need a considerable number of Demon Swords to successfully rouse the Undead King.”

The sacrifice required for awakening a Dark Lord was a collection of Demon Swords, transformed Holy Swords. Gathering them was quite difficult. The plan for gathering Demon Swords using the *Hyperion* had failed, and on top of that, they’d wasted a great number of them reviving the Holy Woman of the Six Heroes.

“I may have something that can help with that.” Zemein shook the hems of his robe. A moment later, a black shadow shaped like a fairy appeared in his hand.

“What is it?” Nefakess asked.

“An Artificial Elemental I’ve created.”

The fairy spun and danced on top of Zemein’s palm.

“Artificial Elemental… The highly advanced magical technology granted to humankind by the goddess, yes?” Nefakess questioned.

“Indeed. This one, Seraphim, has had a fragment of the goddess successfully implanted within it. By using the Astral Garden, it momentarily makes contacts with a Holy Swordsman and connects them with the goddess’s voice and future sight.”

“I see. And that causes a Holy Sword to invert.” Nefakess nodded, as if satisfied with the explanation.

“That’s not all. I’ve already hatched a plan to produce a great number of Demon Swords,” Zemein said. “A human city that’s rife with Holy Swords to invert has docked near Necrozoa, where Lord Leonis slumbers, I believe.”

“The Seventh Assault Garden. What do you plan to do?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see my scheme play out, Lord Nefakess,” Zemein replied with a vicious smile. “I will not stumble into the same rut you have with the Holy Woman and the Dragon Lord.”

“I’m beside myself with expectation, Sir Zemein,” Nefakess stated with a composed grin. Then he snapped his fingers. “Setsura, come here.”

“As you wish.”

A petite shadow stepped out of the darkness. It was a girl, clad in white Sakura Orchid garb and an ivory mask over her face. She had long, brilliant blue hair that extended down to her waist.

“Sir Zemein intends to visit Necrozoa. Escort him,” instructed Nefakess.

“…By your will.”

“I have no need of an escort,” Zemein protested with a shrug.

“No, *one can never be too careful*,” Nefakess shot back with a sneer, a dark light shining in his eyes.

CHAPTER 5
EXTERMINATION MISSION

Elfiné awoke in the morning feeling completely drained and fatigued.

Maybe it's because of what happened yesterday.

She sat up in her bed, her black eyes turning to look out the window. After shaking her head, she brushed her hair down with her fingers. Her platoon had been requested to attend an emergency meeting today.

Elfiné took a quick shower, got dressed, and walked down to the dorm's common room. The Holy Light Festival had only been a few days ago, and some of the decorations from Hræsvelgr dorm's haunted café were still on the walls.

Once she took a seat by the tables, Elfiné booted up her terminal to read the latest news. Yesterday's incident was being reported on, but it was a fairly small article. The academy likely pressured the press bureau not to make a big deal out of it.

There's no way they'd let them release a story about how a Holy Swordsman, one of humankind's protectors, lost control of their weapon and attacked civilians...

Even so, yesterday's affair was too conspicuous to completely keep under wraps, and Holy Swordsmen harboring anti-nationalist sentiments weren't entirely unheard of.

Upon having had his Demon Sword destroyed, Muselle Rhodes fell unconscious and was carried off to an Excalibur Academy medical facility. He wasn't in critical physical condition, but his recollection of the incident seemed vague, and he remained in a state of constant panic. It was likely he would never manifest a Holy Sword again.

Did he hear the "voice of a goddess", too...?

Muselle's terminal had been confiscated by the administration bureau. Elfiné had managed to discreetly access it, however, searching for any signs of involvement by a Phillet Company Artificial Elemental.

Although happening upon signs that Muselle's terminal had been used in tandem with Artificial Elementals, there was nothing to prove a connection between them and the Demon Sword.

The public article hinted that an anti-imperial terrorist faction might have pushed Muselle to commit the crime. Elfiné tapped on her monitor with a finger, closing the article and moving on to the next one. A Seventh Assault Garden aerial probe had discovered a large-scale Void Hive in an area 150 kilorels southwest of the Miasma Forest.

A Hive was what Excalibur Academy's textbooks had dubbed a large aggregate of high-density crystals that Voids created after emerging from cracks in reality.

It wasn't clear why Voids formed Hives. One theory supposed it was necessary for the twisted things to do so to fix their existence in this world for prolonged periods of time. Regardless, if a large Hive was left unattended for too long, it was bound to cause a Stampede.

That's probably what the meeting is about.

Elfiné felt her breathing turn ragged. The image of what happened six months ago flashed in her mind…

"Ah, good morning, Miss Finé," came a voice, prompting the young woman to jolt and look up.

"Good morning, Selia…"

One of Elfiné's juniors had come down the stairs. The light spilling in from the window cast a beautiful glow on her hair.

"Oh, where's Leo?" Elfiné asked, realizing Riselia's roommate, Leonis, wasn't with her.

"The room was empty when I went to wake him up. Where could he have gone?" Riselia wondered, puffing her cheeks sullenly.

"He should have been informed about the meeting. He'll be here when it's time," Elfiné assured gently.

"Yes. I guess it's not unusual for Leo to disappear…" Riselia sighed.

"Taking care of a boy must be hard work," Elfiné remarked with a bitter smile.

"Hmm…Miss Finé, what exactly happened yesterday?" Riselia inquired while settling into an adjacent chair.

"You mean regarding Muselle Rhodes's Holy Sword?"

"Yes. It was like…" Riselia trailed off, hesitating.

"—like a Void," Elfiné finished.

Riselia pursed her lips tightly. Despite being called a failure, she had earnestly worked toward the day she would finally summon a Holy Sword. Her homeland had been ruined and her parents killed, thus she had sought the power to combat the Voids for years before finally awakening to the power of her own Holy Sword.

Seeing one of the weapons meant to help save humanity assume such a terrible form had undoubtedly been difficult for Riselia to accept.

"Apparently, they call that a 'Demon Sword'…," Elfiné said.

"A Demon Sword?" Riselia regarded the other girl with a doubtful look.

Elfiné launched into an explanation about the experiment to evolve Holy Swords, the unidentified Artificial Elemental involved in it, and of how those who'd developed Demon Sword powers reported hearing the voice of a goddess. However, she kept the Phillet Company's possible involvement to herself. Riselia had a strong sense of justice, and Elfiné was loath to get her friend involved in her family's infighting.

Once Elfiné concluded her story, Riselia brought a hand to her jaw pensively. “I think the beastmen terrorists that attacked the *Hyperion* referred to their powers as Demon Swords, too…,” she recalled.

Elfiné nodded. “Indeed. And nonhumans shouldn’t be able to wield the power of the planet.”

The power granted to the beastmen terrorists—the Demon Swords. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. Could it have been related to the power that had transformed Muselle Rhodes’s Holy Sword into a Void-like monster?

“However, it’s not just the Demon Swords that are baffling,” Elfiné stated. “We understand precious little about Holy Swords.”

They were a miraculous power the planet had bequeathed to humans for the purpose of combating Voids. That was the official doctrine espoused by the empire and the Human Church, but was it really the truth?

“Either way, we should be careful. There’s certainly other students infected by Demon Sword power,” warned Elfiné.

Riselia bobbed her head with a nervous expression. “U-understood.”

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“A pleasant morning, wouldn’t you say, Leo?”

Veira Greater Dragon stood atop a high-rise building, looking down at the Central Garden below. She was no longer in the outfit she wore yesterday, but in her original, revealing Dragon Lord getup. Her waist-length crimson hair flowed gently in the salty breeze.

“I hate mornings,” grumbled Leonis.

“Ah, right. You always did,” Veira said with a grin.

Even after being reborn in a human form, Leonis still despised the morning sun. During his reign as the Undead King, he would remain deep underground, within Necrozoa, and sleep in a stone coffin. He was tempted to cast the sixth-order spell, the Demon Night’s Curtain, and cover the sky in darkness. However, the Seventh Assault Garden used solar panels to gather energy and convert it into mana as a secondary power source. So blotting out the sky would cripple the city.

I’ll never understand why Riselia likes morning so much.

As a Vampire Queen—the highest rank of undead—Riselia could function under the sun without any debilitating effects. Still, undead weren’t supposed to like daylight.

“So why did you call me to a place like this?” Leonis asked, making his displeasure plain. He knew dragons preferred high summits, but surely Veira hadn’t called him all the way here to appreciate the view.

“I like your kingdom, Leo,” Veira stated, turning to face him. “The ice cream was really good.”

“My kingdom isn’t limited to this city,” Leonis responded. “I intend to place humankind’s greatest stronghold, the imperial capital, Camelot, under my dominion. And the other Assault Gardens, too.”

“Really? I don’t have much interest in human lands…” Veira gazed at the cloudless, blue sky spanning above them. “I think I’ll go look for the Azure Hold.”

Leonis furrowed his brow. “Didn’t the Divine Dragon destroy it?”

The Azure Hold was a dragon citadel that once floated through the sky. Just like the Undead King’s Staff of Sealed Sins, it stood as a symbol of the Dark Lords’ Armies’ might and terror. However, the Divine Dragon of the Six Heroes, Gisark, led a force of holy dragons to destroy it.

Veira shook her head. “It only crashed into the ocean. I’m sure it’s still slumbering somewhere in the depths. Along with the remains of the many dragon warriors who fought with me…”

“…So you’re doing this to mourn them.”

“Yes. And to learn more about that star,” Veira replied, glaring at something beyond the sky. “The Azure Hold has astronomical observation devices meant to assist in its flight. If I could check the records kept there, I might learn about changes to the heavens in the last one thousand years.”

“Is stars realigning truly so important?” Leonis questioned.

“Dragons can foresee the fate of the world by using the Azure Hold’s instruments. If I could examine the stars closely, I might get a handle on what’s going on.”

“…I see.”

Leonis had to admit Arakael’s words were hard to ignore.

“The world shall be reborn with the Star of Nothingness.”

Nothingness, Voids, and Holy Swords…

A gust of wind tussled Veira’s long locks before the breeze grew into a whirlwind that billowed around her. The Dragon Lord’s horns began growing longer at an alarming rate.

“I’ve heard those Void monstrosities tend to build Hives in ancient ruins. Be careful,” Leonis said.

There was a chance her long dead dragon companions had been turned to Voids, as well.

“Leo, whom do you take me for?” Veira turned around, baring her fangs at him with a ferocious expression. “If anyone is foolish enough to besmirch my castle, I shall slaughter them. And as for the one who was arrogant enough to attempt converting me into a filthy Void monster, I shall personally tear out their intestines and burn them to ashes.”

“Of course. My apologies, Veira. That was unbecoming of me to say.”

Nothing was more discourteous to show a Dark Lord than concern.

My overprotective minion’s influence must be rubbing off on me, Leonis mused wryly.

Two dragon wings sprouted out of Veira’s back. “I’d love to have a serious battle next time we meet, Leo,” she stated.

Leonis scoffed, an indomitable smirk on his lips. “As would I. Next time, I should fight you with your power restored.”

“Make sure to raise that vampire minion of yours well. She shows promise. Few could snap at me like that, after all.”

“Your suggestion is duly noted, but uncalled for.”

Flame danced over Veira’s crimson locks, rapidly enveloping her entire body. The fire burned bright, becoming a burning pillar that extended to the heavens. A moment later, a gigantic, crimson dragon took flight overhead.

The strongest life-form in the world, the sovereign of all dragons, and one of the mighty Dark Lords. The demonic tyrant of the dragons, Veira Greater Dragon, soared through the air in all her majesty.

“…You really are most beautiful in this form, Veira.”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Spreading her gigantic wings, the Dragon Lord bellowed. As the siren of the city’s defense system blared, Veira circled over the Seventh Assault Garden.

It was a hectic couple of days, but I think your absence will be sorely felt.

Leonis watched Veira’s form shrink as she flew into the horizon.

“…She really does come and go like a storm.”

The shadow at Leonis’s feet rippled slightly, and a petite girl peeked out of it. She pinched at the hem of Leonis’s trousers sheepishly.

“What are you doing, Shary?”

“M-my apologies, my lord. It’s just that you were…erm, together with the Dragon Lord.” Shary looked around cautiously, keeping herself submerged in Leonis’s shadow except for her face.

I guess I can’t blame her…

Shary had borne witness to the violence Veira had wrought one thousand years ago. With an army of dragons at her beck and call, she had razed entire countries. Any opponent she believed worthy, she challenged, whether they were an enemy, a god, or another Dark Lord. The Dragon Lord was a living calamity that brought ruin to places merely by passing over them.

I suppose all the other Dark Lords were like that.

“The Dragon Lord won’t be coming back, will she?” Shary asked anxiously.

“Don’t worry. She’s departed in search of the Azure Hold’s remains.”

“Is that so…?” Shary sighed with relief and slipped out of Leonis’s shadow.

Leonis regarded Shary’s attire with confusion. “Hmm? What’s with that getup?”

She wasn’t dressed in her usual maid’s garb. The design of her outfit resembled her typical uniform in some respects, but was the color of young leaves and had a distinct foreign feel to it.

“Oh, you noticed, my lord?” Shary beamed happily.

“I think anyone would.”

“No, my lord, you can be quite dense at times…,” Shary stated bluntly and pointed at one of the city squares below them. “I got it in that block over there. It’s an autonomous area populated by survivors of the Sakura Orchid.”

“The Sakura Orchid. Sakuya’s homeland.”

As Leonis thought on it, he realized Shary’s clothes resembled Sakuya’s modified uniform. The section of the city it had come from was a self-governing region of the Seventh Assault Garden. It must have been like the sixth sector, where the demi-humans and elves lived.

“My maid uniform may appear conspicuous, so I thought I’d acquire some clothes that don’t stand out as much,” Shary explained.

She gave a small twirl to show off, the long hems of the garment dancing through the air.

“…It does suit you, I suppose,” Leonis observed frankly.

“M-my lord, such kind words are wasted on me!” Shary hung her head, her face turning red. “Oh, I brought you a gift!”

Leonis raised an eyebrow. “Hmm?”

Shary produced three skewers with sleek colorful spheres stuck on them.

“What are these?” Leonis inquired.

“They are a type of sweet called a *dango*, my lord,” Shary explained.

“Oh.”

“Please, have one.” Shary eagerly offered Leonis one of the skewers.

Leonis accepted it and took a bite. “Mm. It’s got a springy texture, like a doughnut,” he remarked.

“I felt the same way!” came Shary’s earnest reply.

As Leonis tried to swallow the *dango*, it got stuck in his throat. The Undead King coughed and started tapping his chest.

“Have some tea, my lord,” Shary said, offering him a cup.

“Oh, thank you.” Leonis accepted the drink and washed down the *dango*. “So why were you investigating the Sakura Orchid?” he asked his minion.

“It was because I bade her to, Lord Magnus,” replied a low voice.

A pair of golden eyes peered at Leonis from his shadow and a black wolf emerged.

“Blackas? What is the meaning of this?”

“The Sakura Orchid’s people are quite interesting,” Blackas explained. “Some among them can wield a mysterious power that is neither sorcery nor Holy Sword.”

“Oh? That does sound interesting.”

One thousand years ago, there existed a people who possessed a unique ability dubbed Sagecraft. They had served the Lord of Rage.

“Do all from the Sakura Orchid have this power?” Leonis questioned.

“It’s too early to know for certain,” Blackas admitted. “But that blue-haired girl’s physical prowess may be related to that ability. And the populace of the Sakura Orchid appear to keep different traditions from the

rest of the Integrated Empire. Perhaps they will be our key to learning more about why so much history seems to have been wiped away.”

If the current empire was behind the legends of the Dark Lords and Six Heroes being erased from history, then those missing accounts might have survived among the Sakura Orchid’s people.

“…I see. Continue your research, then. And if you find any who look like they might be of use for the Dark Lords’ Armies, find a way to recruit them,” instructed Leonis.

“Understood,” Blackas answered.

Shary bowed her head respectfully. “It will be done, my lord.”

Suddenly, Riselia’s voice began to crackle out of Leonis’s terminal. **“… Leo, where are you? The meeting’s about to start.”**

“I made your favorite for breakfast, kid. Omelet rice ♪ ,” Regina’s voice cheerfully added.

“…S-sorry, I’ll be right there,” Leonis replied hurriedly, and he used the shadow corridors to return to the dorm.

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“…I’m sorry I’m late,” Leonis apologized as he walked through the front door of the dorm.

“Where were you, Leo? I was worried sick,” his overprotective minion scolded.

Plates of breakfast food lined the table in the common room. The rest of the eighteenth platoon were already seated.

“Well, Veira told me she’s returning to her homeland, so I went to see her off,” Leonis told the others.

“Really?” Riselia said, clearly surprised. “That’s…very sudden…”

“I don’t think she ever intended to remain for very long,” Leonis hastily replied.

“But she left the city all by herself?”

“She’s a very free-spirited sort of person. I’ve no doubt she’ll be fine.”

“I—I see…” Riselia furrowed her brow, evidently still a little concerned. “If she’s Leo’s friend, I guess it’s all right,” she whispered to herself, apparently content with that vague explanation.

Leonis was surprised to see her expression looked rather wistful at the prospect of Veira’s departure. Perhaps that match in the pool had brought the two together, if only a bit.

Veira seemed to acknowledge Riselia’s strength, too…

“For now, just take a seat, kid. Your breakfast is getting cold,” Regina urged him.

Leonis complied, sitting in front of a plate of fluffy omelet rice with a large lump of butter on it, crispy toast, bacon, salad, and arugula. The omelet rice was done to the point of artistic perfection, making it clear that Regina was the one who had prepared the meal today.

Curiously, Leonis’s omelet rice also had a little flag planted in it.

“I don’t need this. Please stop treating me like a child,” the Dark Lord insisted, grumpily pulling the tiny thing out before digging into his omelet rice.

The eighteenth platoon began their emergency meeting over breakfast.

“So this is about the Hive extermination mission?” Leonis asked.

“Yes. We’re to destroy a force of dormant Voids before they hatch. The location is roughly a hundred and fifty kilorels to the southwest, near the Miasma Forest. There’s a chance that this Hive spans a fairly large distance.”

As Riselia spoke, she tapped the map on her terminal to indicate the place. A location known as the Forest of Death…

That’s where Necrozoa’s ruins are! Leonis thought, his eyes widening in surprise.

The Dark Lords’ Armies final bastion was a massive underground labyrinth composed of thirteen strata. Death Hold, Leonis’s personal fortress, sat on the surface, along with a temple devoted to the goddess Roselia Ishtaris. The ground around Necrozoa was enveloped with a noxious haze, rendering the place a land of death.

Such had been the case one thousand years ago, anyhow. Death Hold fell to the human alliance and the Six Heroes. In the time since, a thick forest had swallowed the remains.

“That’s near where we found you, Leo,” Riselia remarked.

Pensively, Regina added, “When we investigated the ruins, we ran into multiple large Voids, but there weren’t signs of a sizeable Hive forming yet.”

The Grand Mausoleum where Leonis had sealed himself was deep within the underground labyrinth. He’d placed obfuscating spells to prevent the place from being ransacked by adventurers and grave robbers. Their power must have waned with time, however, allowing Riselia to venture as deep as she had and discover Leonis in magical stasis.

“I think that’s probably the biggest reason they ordered our platoon to assist with this mission,” Elfiné said. “We already have a sense for the area’s topography.”

“Compared to exploring a place we have no data on, the fact you were there once before makes a big difference,” Sakuya added, pushing away the green peas that had been added onto her omelet rice.

“You won’t grow if you’re picky with your food, Sakuya,” Regina chided casually.

“…Tsk!” Sakuya clicked her tongue in frustration. “The kid isn’t eating his peas, either!”

“Well, Leo is still a boy, you can’t blame him,” Elfiné answered, moving the peas Leonis had been avoiding onto her plate.

“You’re spoiling him too much, Miss Finé,” Riselia said. “Leo, you need to eat your veggies.”

“I think you spoil him pretty often, too, Lady Selia…,” Regina quipped in a low tone.

“F-fine,” Leonis huffed and shoveled the little green things back to his plate. He then dropped his gaze to Riselia’s terminal and the map displayed

on it. The collection of red dots over the chart indicated the likely location of the Void Hive. It appeared sizable, with Death Hold as its center.

Going back home to Necrozoa, eh? I doubt there's much left there, though.

The Undead King's old base of operations had been lost a millennium ago. He'd already moved any hero-class artifacts kept there to the Realm of Shadows' treasure vault. There weren't likely to be any bones left worthy of reanimating. Such was why Leonis had prioritized investigating things on the Seventh Assault Garden rather than return there.

However, he couldn't overlook Voids infesting his stronghold, even if the place was little more than rubble now. Many undead had fought and died at Necrozoa; it was a place that deserved reverence.

It's a good chance to sweep my stronghold clean of those pests. I'll destroy them so thoroughly not even ashes will remain.

While Leonis entertained that wicked notion, Riselia explained the size of the unit that would be participating in the operation and the composition of their forces.

"—and that about sums it up for the briefing. Any questions?" asked Riselia, looking around the platoon's members. "We'll be part of a company-sized force. I know it's an extermination mission, but that's a pretty large formation."

"Made up of elites with high grades, no less," Regina chimed in.

"Yes. Liat Guinness, the Blazing Lion from the fifth platoon, will have command of the operation," Riselia continued with a nod. "I won't call it excessive force, but we'll make for a pretty robust unit." The argent-haired girl then faced Elfiné. "Miss Finé, you'll handle backup in the relay base—"

"No, I want to participate in this operation on the site," Elfiné interjected.

"Huh?" Riselia looked at her, her eyes wide with surprise. Regina and Sakuya made similar expressions. Visibly concerned, Riselia gently protested, "But, Miss Finé…"

The older girl shook her head with a faint smile on her face. "Don't worry. It's about time I returned to the front lines. There's some information you can only gather directly from the field, and if I don't participate in battle, my sense for combat won't return. I think that's the only way I'll ever restore my Eye of the Witch's full abilities." There was clear, resolute light to her black eyes.

The lost power of her Holy Sword…

Elfiné's Eye of the Witch possessed outstanding radar capabilities, but she once told Leonis that this wasn't the true power of her Holy Sword. Six months ago, two of her comrades had died while investigating a Void Hive. Elfiné's Holy Sword had lost its strength following that event.

Meeting Elfiné's gaze, Riselia responded, "Understood. We'll have you accompany us this time."

◆

“Ugh… Ha… Aaah, aaah… Nngh…!”

Another terrible awakening. His body felt heavy and damp from cold sweat.

More dreams of *that day*.

He revisited it continually in his nightmares, and the regret never faded. After his platoon dissolved following his failure to protect them, he spent every waking moment fighting Voids—his idea of a fitting punishment. He worked to evolve his Holy Sword and acquire more power.

Then, one day, he started hearing that voice in his head.

The goddess.

“We’re ready to set out, Captain!”

“Yeah, I’ll be right over.”

Extinguishing the black, malformed flames he’d produced in the palm of his hand, the man rose to his feet.

CHAPTER 6
NECROZOA

A row of eight military vehicles drove across the wasteland, leaving a large cloud of dust in their wake. It was 13:00 Imperial Standard Time. The special attack force charged with destroying the Void Hive had departed from the temporary relay base and was approaching the Forest of Death.

“We’re about forty kilorels from the spot where we found you, Leo,” Riselia said, her hands on the vehicle’s steering wheel. “The Hive should be about thirty kilorels from there, inside the woods.”

The vehicle’s roof had been opened. Sakuya was situated in the front passenger seat, while Regina and Elfiné were reclining on a sheet in the back seat. Leonis sat squatted, sandwiched between the two.

“Feeling cramped, kid?” Regina needled.

“…I—I’m fine,” Leonis replied, hanging his head to hide his flushed cheeks.

The road was uneven and lined with rocks. Each time the vehicle jerked, the girls’ breasts jiggled visibly under their uniforms.

“Hee-hee, if you’re feeling cramped, you can put your head on my lap, Leo,” Elfiné offered, tapping on her thighs.

“N-no, thank you!”

“That’s not fair, Miss Finé. I want the kid to rest on my lap, too,” Regina complained.

“Right, then let’s have him rest on one of our legs each.”

“Oh, that should work! Here you go, kid, you can put your head on my knee.”

Riselia turned around from the driver’s seat, pouting. “…C-cut that out, you two!”

“Keep your eyes on the road, Miss Selia,” Sakuya scolded, yanking on Riselia’s sleeve.

The vehicle shook hard, sending Leonis lurching face-first into Elfiné’s and Regina’s chests.

I—I can’t keep my composure like this…!

As Leonis grew more uncomfortable, the shadow under him wavered slightly.

“You really are a perv, my lord…,” Shary’s voice sounded from beneath Leonis.

“…No, I’m not!” Leonis snapped back despite himself.

“Is something wrong, kid?” Regina eyed him with suspicion.

“N-no, nothing…,” Leonis muttered.

“Look, the weather’s starting to change—,” Elfiné said, pointing ahead.

A vast forest spread out beyond the wasteland. The dark miasma rising from it hung like a gloomy curtain over the wood's skies. The Undead King's curse still permeated the land.

It seems that the humans gave up on purifying the region and left it as is.

"Mana detection devices don't function properly in areas where the miasma is especially thick, right?" Riselia questioned.

Elfiné nodded. "Yes. The same is true for communication tools, too. So while we're here, the detector-type Holy Swordsmen will need to remain coordinated."

"That reminds me. Sakuya, you were in a Hive extermination mission before, right?" Regina asked.

"Yes, but it was a much smaller unit," Sakuya replied, casting a glance in the direction of the other vehicles running ahead and behind the eighteenth platoon's. "It looks like, aside from us, they dispatched some of the academy's best."

"Does the administration bureau decide the structure of incursion forces during missions?" Leonis inquired.

"Yeah, HQ refers to the data of the Holy Swords they have on record and assembles the teams based on the operation's objectives," Elfiné replied. "Extermination missions are perilous, so they take each platoon's skill level into consideration."

"…I see."

"Still, this is a little strange…," Elfiné admitted.

"What is?" questioned Leonis.

"Well, it feels like this time the way they chose the units was pretty biased," Elfiné said, peering down at her data analysis terminal with a dubious, troubled expression. "I mean, there's all sorts of Holy Swords with different powers, so it stands to reason they'd prioritize certain types over others, but…"

"Could someone have intentionally selected these platoons for a hidden purpose?" Leonis suggested.

"…I'm probably just imagining it," dismissed Elfiné.

"The Artificial Elementals handle comparing the Holy Swords' data, but the commander's the one who makes the final decision," Regina explained. "The folks in charge consider all sorts of stuff. Maybe they wanted to push the units under their direct command, so they have more combat experience?"

"That's possible," Elfiné agreed. "I guess it just made me curious, is all…" With a bit of an awkward smile, Elfiné shut her terminal.

◆

In the deepest reaches of the forest, where the dark miasma hung low over the air, was a gigantic temple made of black quartz. It was overrun with

shrubbery. The altar for worshipping the goddess was cracked and worn, and the place was bereft of the grave splendor it once possessed.

Two figures stepped out of the gloom. One was a hooded, horned old man, and the other was a blue-haired girl wearing a white mask.

“Will this place be of any use to us?” the masked girl asked, half a step behind her elderly companion.

Despite traipsing through such a deep, thick forest, her alabaster garb was wholly untarnished.

“Oh, it should do just fine. The true shrine, where prophecies are given, lies deep underground in Necrozoa.”

Zemein stepped forward and touched the surface of the altar.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr…!

The ground shook sonorously in response, and an ominous glow illuminated the area. The altar split in two, its center becoming a gate of light.

“This is one of the sorceries weaved by the great and mighty Undead King.” Zemein spread his arms in reverence for Necrozoa’s master. “Simply splendid. Even a thousand years later, its power still lingers.”

Zemein stepped through the luminous portal. Beyond it was a vast cave that housed an underground lake. Candlesticks enchanted to burn eternally lit up the translucent surface of the water.

“This is the Goddess Temple?” the girl asked, crossing through the gate a moment after Zemein.

“No. The shrine is beneath this lake,” Zemein replied. He swept his hand over the air and recited an incantation. A sphere of mana formed in his wrinkled hand, which displayed visions of some other place. The globe showed that a formation of Excalibur Academy vehicles was on its way to the Forest of Death. “We need only wait for the sacrificial Demon Swords to gather here,” he said.

“What of the Undead King’s sealed body?” the masked girl inquired.

“Lord Leonis should still be slumbering deep within Necrozoa. Only he and Roselia Ishtaris can undo the magic that keeps him there. Should the temple activate and the goddess call for him, he will awaken,” Zemein explained with confidence.

“It is said the Undead King was the strongest of the Dark Lords. Can we really control him?”

“The humans exhumed the Dragon Lord before she could fully awaken, and so she was unleashed in an incomplete manner,” Zemein said with an insidious chuckle. “That won’t happen here.”

◆

Passing through the eerily bubbling surface of the marshlands, they entered the dense woodland rife with a miasma. The Holy Swordsmen parked their vehicles at the entrance to the forest.

Ah, the cold scent of decadence, terror, and death. It takes me back.

As Leonis stepped upon his land, his lips curled up into a smile. The familiar atmosphere exhilarated him, and he enjoyed a long inhale.

“What an eerie place…”

“Yeah, I’d turn back and leave right now if we didn’t have a mission to do.”

Riselia and the other girls didn’t seem to appreciate the place.

A tall young man raised his voice, drawing attention to himself. “We will now split up into two groups.”

Leonis recognized the speaker. He had visited the haunted café during the Holy Light Festival alongside Fenris. Of course, at the time, Leonis was in girls’ clothing, so the young man likely didn’t recognize him right now. He was apparently quite the overachiever and had been appointed commander on the field for this mission.

Liat the Blazing Lion, if I recall correctly. I assume his Holy Sword has flame powers.

Liat instructed the unit to split into two groups composed of three platoons each. The order to do so had come directly from Excalibur Academy headquarters. Each group was to investigate different areas, and upon finding the Void Hive, they were to inform the other.

The eighteenth platoon was going to operate alongside Liat’s fifth platoon and Silesia Mia’s twenty-sixth platoon. Silesia wielded a Holy Sword with the rare power of healing. Between the two groups, each had one Holy Sword with radar capabilities and one that could heal.

“Looking forward to working with you, Leonis, ♪ ” Silesia said with an amicable smile as she shook his hand. “I know this place is scary, but my platoon and I will protect you.”

“Yes, thank you,” Leonis replied politely, albeit a bit miffed at being treated like a child.

“The kid’s pretty strong despite appearances, you know,” Regina commented.

“Oh, is he?” Silesia asked.

“Absolutely. And he’s pervier than you might suspect, too.”

“Really? But you’re just ten years old. You precocious child, you. ♪ ”

“M-Miss Regina?!” Leonis protested.

During that exchange, Elfiné and the other Holy Swordsmen suited to scouting and communication set to link up their Holy Swords. There would be no additional form of contacting the other group once they entered the forest.

“We’ll begin our search as soon as their Holy Swords have finished connecting,” Liat stated.

◆

Despite it being noon, the woods were so dark one could easily believe it was nighttime. A thick, swirling miasma hung over the sky like storm

clouds, and the treetops blocked off any light that managed to penetrate the vapor.

More unsettling was the silence. One couldn't hear the chirping of any birds or indeed any animal sounds. There was only the group's footfalls and the rustling of shifting foliage.

The Undead King's kingdom rejected all creatures. Nothing could exist in this environment, except for those who were an affront to the rules of this world…like the Voids.

Leonis's group continued through the trees, with Elfiné's Eye of the Witch orb floating ahead of them. Unaware that the ground they tread upon was full of wicked magic and countless undead.

"It seems like everything that ever resided here has perished," Riselia whispered. "This really is a forest of death." She swallowed nervously and tightened her grip on Leonis's hand.

"You don't have to hold my hand, Miss Selia," Leonis said with a frown.

"What if you get lost?" Riselia countered, tightening her hold and pulling Leonis along.

This place is like my back garden. I wouldn't lose my way, thought Leonis bitterly. He kept that to himself and allowed Riselia to do as she pleased.

The girls from the other platoons watched the two, giggling.

"He's so cute. Think he's in that rebellious phase?" one of them wondered aloud.

"Leonis, you should listen to what your big sister says!" another told him.

"Grr…!" Leonis hung his head bashfully, telepathically communicating with the shadow at his feet.

"…Have you spotted anything suspicious, Shary?"

"No, there's nothing out of the ordinary in the area, my lord," she replied.

The girl didn't make for an excellent maid, but she was a first-rate assassin. When it came to surveillance, Shary was more dependable than any of Leonis's detecting spells. To that end, he left Blackas behind to watch his kingdom in his absence and had Shary accompany him.

"By the way, my lord…"

"What is it?"

"Is there anything you'd like to take back from here? The treasure vault in the Realm of Shadows has some spare space, so if any magical tools might be of use to you, I could look for them."

"Hmm, well…"

The ruins on the surface were terribly ravaged, but that decay likely didn't extend to the deeper levels of Leonis's subterranean kingdom. There could be some powerful weapons or magical items remaining. Most of them were junk to Leonis, though.

“Nothing worth taking back comes to mind—Actually, wait. Zemein’s should be below.”

“The chimera laboratory? But isn’t that place…?”

“…Yes, I sealed it.”

Zemein Vairel had been a staff officer of the Dark Lords’ Armies. He’d crossbred monsters in the hopes of creating biological weapons. Unfortunately, the results of his research proved so gruesome that Leonis had forced him to end them, denouncing the work as an affront to the Dark Lords’ Armies and the Goddess of Rebellion.

Ultimately, Zemein allied himself with the Six Heroes’ Archsage. He was a disgrace to the Dark Lords’ Armies.

“But there were a few of his chimeras I never did find back then.”

“You think they might still be alive?”

“I doubt it. But it may be worthwhile to collect the results of his research. He was a foul subordinate to have, but his passion for researching chimeras was genuine.”

“Understood, my lord.”

Undead alone wouldn’t be enough to rebuild the Dark Lords’ Armies. Now that the monsters of the old world had gone extinct, creating new ones could be an effective way of increasing Leonis’s ranks.

You can feel proud, Zemein. I will put your research to good use, Leonis told himself with a wicked smile.

“What’s wrong, Leo?” Riselia asked, glancing at him dubiously.

◆

After two hours of treading into the depths of the forest…

“—Wait,” Elfiné suddenly warned them. “There’s something ahead.”

Everyone stopped in their tracks and gazed at where the Eye of the Witch orb was hovering. There they saw a small lake. A moss-covered sculpture had toppled into the clear water at some point, and many vines ran across it like snakes. It was in a terrible state of decay.

“Hmm, it looks pretty evil…,” Riselia remarked fearfully.

“I’ve never seen this kind of statue in our ancient text studies courses…,” Sakuya added, seemingly agreeing with Riselia’s assessment.

“…” Leonis remained behind the girls, his expression strained. Out of everyone present, he alone recognized this sculpture. It was a statue of the Undead King. He’d had his skeletons erect it in his honor long ago. There should have been mana crystals inlaid in its eyes, which shone in the dark, but someone had stolen them.

Leonis surmised that it had been destroyed during the final battle for Necrozoa, when it had risen as an animated statue to engage in combat. Its valiant fighting went down in legend, and it struck terror into the hearts of those who beheld it and believed the sculpture to be the real Dark Lord.

“…It’s pretty creepy.”

“It kinda scares me…”

“It looks like it could come to life.”

A few other group members offered their opinions.

…C-curse you, fools…! Leonis grit his teeth.

Shary tried to comfort him. “I—I think it looks lovely, my lord!”

“…I-it’s fine… These people simply lack a sense of aesthetics.” Leonis nodded to himself, being the forgiving Dark Lord he was.

“Should I smash it?” Regina offered, aiming her Holy Sword at the statue.

“…What?!” Leonis suddenly squeaked.

Regina looked at him, puzzled. “Something the matter, kid?”

“You can’t break it,” Riselia told her. “It’s a valuable, ancient relic.”

“I—I agree!” Leonis hurriedly appended.

Good one, my minion!

Riselia squatted in front of the sculpture. “…Let’s see. Looks like something’s carved into it.” She took out a dictionary and tried to decipher the writing. “Huh. Where have I seen this text before…?”

“Perhaps that should wait until later, Lady Selia,” Regina reminded her.

“R-right…” Riselia cleared her throat and got to her feet.

“I think this is a good place to set up camp,” Liat stated, glancing around.

There weren’t many trees around the lake, making it a relatively open space.

The residual mana in the statue likely kept plants from growing here.

“I’m not sure if the lake’s water is safe for drinking, though,” Liat continued. He kneeled in front of the lake and scooped up some of the liquid.

“I can use my Holy Sword to analyze its quality,” Elfiné offered, holding up her Eye of the Witch orb over the lake.

“Go ahead,” replied Liat.

I think the skeleton armory was around this area. Leonis didn’t recall a lake here. In all likelihood, water had gradually pooled over the years.

“It seems to be drinkable,” Elfiné concluded. “But we should set up a filtering device, just in case.”

“All right. Then we’ll make camp here. Contact the other units,” Liat instructed.

◆

At 17:00 Imperial Standard Time, the sun was dipping into the horizon, and a heavy darkness settled over the forest. The team hung lanterns with mana crystals and set up collapsible cottages for each platoon. Each cottage was made of a thin fabric, but used special fibers that maintained a comfortable temperature inside.

I thought I’d gotten used to this, but the advancements in their technology never cease to amaze.

That said, the small information terminals, which were the cutting-edge of said technology, were useless in these woods. Since magical apparatuses were affected by mana, they couldn't operate properly within a heavy miasma. The group had to rely on mana stone lanterns for light, a fairly primitive method from Leonis's era.

Riselia sat beneath one lamp, her nose stuck in her memo book. She was caught up in trying to decode the inscription on the statue and was writing something down while comparing notes with a leather-bound book.

As I recall she's had a longstanding interest in ancient sites.

Riselia's fascination with ruins had been fostered by her father, Duke Crystalia, who researched old locales. Had it not been for that, she wouldn't have discovered Leonis in the underground mausoleum, and she wouldn't have become his minion.

Leonis noticed Riselia's face was slightly flushed with excitement as she worked. He couldn't help but be fascinated at the sight of her so engrossed.

"You shouldn't disturb Lady Selia, kid," Regina whispered in his ear suddenly. "When she gets like this, everything you say to her goes in one ear and out the other."

"…I can see that, yes." Leonis shrugged and turned around. "Miss Regina, what are you doing?"

The blond young woman was kneeling over a sheet with a pot and a kitchen knife set on it.

"I'm cooking. ♪ "

"But they gave us our rations already…"

Military rations were highly nutritious bars made out of dried fruit. When Leonis had first met Riselia, she'd given him one such bar, which he found quite tasty. The Dark Lord had harbored a liking for them ever since.

"Those are kind of bland, and my professional pride as a maid compels me to make sure Lady Selia has a hot meal anywhere, anytime." Regina placed her hands on her hips boastfully.

"I think the rations are pretty tasty, though," Sakuya remarked, munching on a bar.

"Ah, Sakuya, stop!" Regina moved in to snatch the half-eaten survival food away from her.

However, Sakuya, with her natural swiftness, easily avoided her.

"…How do you move like that?!" demanded Regina.

"It's a traditional Sakura Orchid technique."

Leonis sighed, rose to his feet, and walked out of the cottage. Outside, he could see the other platoons making camp.

…I'd hoped to check on the situation in Necrozoa, but I can't risk anything so conspicuous with all these eyes on me.

He walked in the direction of the lake, hoping to at least pick up some fallen bones. There could be some useful ones at the bottom.

◆

“…Hmm, the age isn’t clear. But it’s definitely over five hundred years old.”

Standing at the banks of the lake, Elfiné entered data into her terminal.

“There’s a faint mana reaction, but I’ve never seen this kind of pattern…”

Small glowing spheres were circling the toppled statue, recording footage of it. This was a probing report Elfiné would turn in to the higher-ups. Why Hives formed in ancient ruins was unknown. By gathering data, the leaders at the academy hoped to discover some hint toward solving that mystery and the others surrounding the Voids.

After recording enough of the statue, Elfiné sent her orbs into the water. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the image her Eye of the Witch spheres relayed to her. The overwhelming information would have burned out a lesser mind. Elfiné was well accustomed to manipulating eight orbs at once, however, so it was hardly a strain.

Beneath the lake’s surface, she saw what looked like a stone staircase covered in moss.

Is there a structure submerged here? Just how far does it go?

There was little to be seen in the darkness of the water, but that there were any structures at all in this part of the forest was unexpected.

I’ll try going deeper… Ah?!

An abrupt shiver ran through Elfiné’s body. Innumerable glowing red lights appeared from the lakebed. Fear seized the young woman. The footage from her spheres was cut off, and Elfiné’s senses were yanked back to her body.

My Holy Sword, it just—!

The Eye of the Witch had been destroyed. Ripples crossed the surface of the previously calm lake.

Bwooooooooosh!

A crustacean-like monster surfaced, its countless tendrils wiggling.

“…A Void?!”

It was a medium-sized one, a specimen unregistered in the database.

Is there a Hive under this lake?! Elfiné wondered morbidly.

The Void spewed oily black vapor from its carapace and coiled its tentacles around Elfiné’s legs. A burning, sizzling pain ran through her calves.

“Aah! Khh… Nngh!” Elfiné moaned in agony, gritting her teeth. She tried to call her Eye of the Witch again, but she couldn’t manifest the Holy Sword.

…Why?!

The Void twisted its tentacles, attempting to drag Elfiné into the lake.

A feeble shriek climbed up Elfiné’s throat. “…N-no… Help…”

The day her comrades died flashed before her eyes, just as vivid as it had been six months ago.

“Please… Someone…,” she groaned.

The Void monster opened its gigantic maw, and…

“Mel Ziora!”

Booooooooooom!

…Crimson flames billowed through the air, reducing the monstrous thing to ash in the blink of an eye. The tendrils that had coiled around Elfiné’s legs went flying before disintegrating.

“Are you okay, Miss Elfiné?” a voice asked her.

She turned around with a start, her eyes settling on her savior.

“Leo…?”

A ten-year-old boy gripping a staff stepped out of the bushes.

◆

Leonis hurried over. “Are you all right?” he asked Elfiné.

That was close.

He’d come running after hearing a scream, and had found Elfiné in the clutches of a Void.

“…Leo… Ngh…”

As Leonis helped Elfiné to her feet, she grimaced. Looking down, he saw that her stockings were torn and her calves burned.

“Does it hurt?”

“Y-yes…,” Elfiné replied weakly before sitting down on a nearby rock.

A shame I can’t use any holy magic.

As the Undead King, Leonis had mastered all manner of sorcery. Holy magic was the only school that eluded him. Restorative power could never be wielded by the cursed hands of a Dark Lord.

“Stay put, I’ll take care of it.” Leonis knelt in front of Elfiné and retrieved a pack of bandages from his shirt’s inner pocket. He’d learned how to apply first aid in Excalibur Academy. Admittedly, Leonis was no expert at it, but he managed to wrap the wounds.

“Leo, what was that just now…?” Elfiné asked, glancing at where the monster had been.

“Erm…” Leonis faltered.

Drat. I wholly annihilated it without thinking.

Vaporizing a medium-sized Void in one hit might have been too much.

“I wanted to protect, and I suppose my power…spiked,” he fibbed after racking his mind for an excuse.

Elfiné smiled softly at Leonis’s words.

I-it’s not fooling her!

She’d witnessed his true strength one time too many.

“Er… Could you keep this a secret, please?” Leonis requested.

“My, how honest of you,” replied Elfiné.

“It’s clear there’s no point in concealing it from you…”

Elfiné smiled and placed an index finger over her lips.

While tending to her wounds, Leonis inquired, “Is there a Void Hive under the lake?”

Wearing a grave expression, Elfiné nodded. “Yes. I didn’t think the Hive was that large, but apparently, the underground structure here is quite vast. I wouldn’t be surprised to find numerous smaller Hives all around it.”

“…I see.” Leonis knew the ruins were undoubtedly more extensive than Elfiné imagined.

The young woman’s attention then turned to the half-sunken statue. “There may have been a great, ancient kingdom here, once,” she muttered.

“Well, that great kingdom has been reduced to ruins. Even the mighty eventually fall,” Leonis responded curtly as he tugged on his handiwork to ensure the bandages were tight. “That should do it. The healing Holy Sword can handle the rest.”

“Thank you. I’ll contact Liat.” Elfiné gave a flourish of her hand, trying to activate the Eye of the Witch.

“Ah…”

Motes of light gathered, but then quickly dispersed.

Leonis cocked an eyebrow. “What’s wrong?”

Elfiné hung her head in evident shame and, biting her lip, explained, “I can’t…summon my Holy Sword.”

A user’s mental state greatly influenced their Holy Sword. The shock of the attack had seemingly left Elfiné feeling disquieted.

“Let’s wait for a while until you calm down, then,” Leonis decided, taking a seat next to the older girl.

“This is pretty unbecoming,” Elfiné said after a sigh. “I’m supposed to be the mature one in the group.”

“That’s not—,” Leonis tried to object, but Elfiné cut him off.

“I’m still scared of the Voids. Remember how I told you I was part of a different platoon before I joined the eighteenth?”

Leonis nodded. Elfiné had lost two of her comrades during a patrol mission through a Void Hive. And ever since, she’d lost the original ability of her Holy Sword.

“I thought I’d eventually overcome the fear and regain my Holy Sword’s power. But somewhere deep down, I’ve been running away all along. I’ve been taking advantage of Selia and the other girls’ kindness.”

“…And that’s why you insisted on joining this mission?”

Elfiné bobbed her head. “Yes. I came here to face and resolve my fears. I figured that anything I’d find by running away would be the wrong kind of strength.”

“The wrong kind of strength?” repeated Leonis.

“I think Muselle Rhodes turned his Holy Sword to a Demon Sword in a bid to reclaim his lost power. And honestly, I kind of understand how he felt. Without Selia and the others…I think I’d have gone the same way,” Elfiné confessed, her gaze dropping to her open palm. “I don’t want to run anymore, though. Not from the Voids or from myself.”

Luminous particles amassed in Elfiné’s hand, coalescing into a sphere of light.

“I think you’re back to normal now,” Leonis said.

Elfiné smiled. “Yeah.”

“I’ll carry us back to camp.”

“How are you going to—Whoa!”

With a wave of his staff, Leonis chanted a gravity control spell. Elfiné’s body floated up into the air, and she hurriedly held her skirt down.

“Let’s go,” Leonis stated, cradling the now lighter Elfiné in his arms.

“W-wait…,” Elfiné objected bashfully. “A-a bridal carry is a little… embarrassing…”

“You don’t need to be shy,” Leonis assured.

“…!”

Elfiné flushed to the tips of her ears.

◆

“I knew the writing on that statue reminded me of something,” Riselia muttered pensively, still sitting in the collapsible cottage.

In one hand, she held the book her father had left behind in his study. The text in it didn’t resemble any language Riselia was familiar with, and it gave the impression it was alien to this world. Still, Riselia’s passion for ancient history refused to be denied, and she had been working out the mysterious language in her spare time. Her intuition told her the writings in the journal and the carvings on the statue were of the same script. Indeed, upon comparing the two, Riselia realized she could decipher some of the engraving.

And I think the letters on the door where I found Leo looked like this, too, she suddenly recalled. Riselia had been inspecting that entrance when it had opened on its own.

Analyzing these matching characters… Maybe I should ask Miss Finé for help here.

By comparing the text in the epitaph and the book, Riselia hoped to create a lexicon that would fully decipher the language. It was laborious work, to be sure, but it was the sort Riselia enjoyed.

As she gradually read through the text she'd recorded from the statue, her eyes suddenly widened in astonishment.

"…A… Lia… Huh? R-Riselia?!"

It seemed her name had been inscribed upon the half-sunken sculpture.

"Oh…I got it wrong. There's a little wedge on the character there, so it's a different vowel…"

Realizing her mistake, Riselia swiftly corrected herself.

"Selia… *Roselia*… Right? Hmm."

The moment she mouthed that name, an inexplicable sort of anxiety overcame her. There was a familiar tugging, as though the young woman had forgotten something important. Riselia and Roselia. Two names with a familiar intonation. What did it all mean?

"Lady Selia, glaring at a book like that is bad for your eyes."

Riselia turned around and saw Regina staring back at her with an exasperated expression. "Don't worry. My night vision's gotten better recently," she replied with a slight smirk.

"…What does that mean?" Regina questioned, puzzled.

Riselia was getting progressively more used to her Vampire Queen body. By focusing mana into her eyes, she could see in the dark as keenly as she would with a pair of night-vision goggles.

I should be careful not to get too accustomed to this, however.

Riselia snapped Duke Crystalia's book shut. An appetizing scent was wafting into the cottage from the outside.

"Dinner's ready," Regina told her.

"Thanks. It smells great."

"I'll go share it with the rest of the group. Might as well, since I went to the trouble of making it."

"Speaking of, where's Leo?" Riselia asked.

"He went outside earlier," Regina replied. "When you get focused on work, you completely lose track of what's going on around you."

"R-really?"

"I know you like investigating ruins, but please try to pay more attention."

CHAPTER 7
NIGHT COMETH

Upon returning to camp, Leonis was greeting by the tantalizing smell of spices.

"Ah, Leo!" Riselia hurried over upon noticing him. "Where were you? I was worried sick." She bent over him with a reproachful look.

"I'm sorry…," Leonis began, but he was soon cut off by Elfiné.

"Don't get mad at him, Selia. Leo saved my neck out there."

"Huh?" Riselia turned to look at Elfiné, and suddenly noticed. "Miss Finé, what happened to your leg?!"

"I was careless. A Void attacked me."

"A-are you all right?! We'll get you patched up right away!" exclaimed Riselia.

"It only grazed me. We need to let Liat know what happened." Elfiné placed a reassuring hand on Riselia's shoulder before walking over to the fifth platoon's camp.

Turning back to Leonis, Riselia asked, "You fought a Void?"

"Yes. It wasn't a very powerful specimen, though," Leonis replied with a shrug and tried to steer the conversation away from that subject. "Did you make any progress on decoding the inscription?"

"It's proving a bit tricky. I'll have to do it little by little after I go back to the academy."

Leonis's expression appeared conflicted. "…I see."

If Riselia decoded the carvings, she could realize who the true ruler of Necrozoa is.

No, I'm overthinking it…

Leonis had scoured Excalibur Academy's library, and hadn't found any evidence to support that the language used for sorcery one thousand years ago was still practiced. And without anything to compare her text to, it was doubtful Riselia would translate it.

"Oh, kid, could you come over here for a second?" Regina was standing by a pot with a fire lit beneath it and motioning for Leonis to approach. Her blond pigtails flopped about like a rabbit's ears as she gestured.

Leonis did as requested.

"What is it?"

"I made dried meat soup. Could you taste it for me?"

Regina lifted the pot's lid, and a cloud of steam carrying the scent of herbs and spices rose up. The soup was an amber shade, with meat and oil mixed in.

"It smells great," Leonis stated.

“It really is!” Riselia said, beaming. “Regina added whatever ingredients we had on hand. She cut up some dried meat and simmered it with the herbs. Then she used salt and pepper for seasoning and a special spice.”

Regina nodded in satisfaction as her mistress explained. Leonis swallowed in expectation. The smell was undeniably appetizing. Regina scooped some soup into a metallic bowl and blew on it a few times. She then put the lump of dried meat on a spoon.

“Open up, kid. Say ‘aahhhh…’”

“Uh…” Leonis looked taken aback.

“Come on, hurry up. It’ll go cold.”

“F-fine…” Leonis blushed and reluctantly parted his lips.

The texture of the dried meat melted on his tongue, and the flavor of the soup’s spices filled his mouth. It was appropriately salty, and the taste revitalized his tired body.

“How is it? Did I use too much salt?” Riselia questioned.

“No, I think it’s just right. It’s good.”

“Heh-heh. Great. ♪ One more bite then. Say ‘aahhhh…’”

“…That’s not fair, Regina! I want to feed Leo, too,” Riselia complained.

Regina shrugged and handed the soup bowl over to her.

“L-Leo, say ‘aahhh…’”

“…I am not some bird for you to feed,” Leonis objected with a frown. Still, he did as asked.

◆

“I see. So there are small groups all around the Hive itself.”

“Yes, in a circle, I believe.” Elfiné was reporting the situation to Liat, and she pointed at her terminal’s monitor to illustrate.

“If we carelessly try to attack the Voids, they’d just surround us,” Liat remarked.

“It’s still just a theory, though. The Regil platoon hasn’t encountered any other groups.”

“All right. I’ll have the fifth platoon patrol the area,” Liat decided, then he glanced at Elfiné’s bandaged leg. “I heard you were injured. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’ll have Silesia tend to it later.”

Liat snuck a glance in Leonis’s direction. “I heard that boy saved you. Defeating a Void at his age, even a small one, is impressive.”

“Y-yeah… Well, it *was* small…,” Elfiné hurriedly replied.

It had actually been a medium-sized Void, something which usually required three Holy Swordsmen to defeat. Elfiné had lied. She didn’t know why, but Leonis was concealing his true power… Naturally, that meant Elfiné herself did not know the true depths of his strength.

“Can you use your Holy Sword?” Liat asked, visibly concerned.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Elfiné summoned the Eye of the Witch to illustrate. “I’m not going to run away anymore. That’s why I came here.”

Liat smiled bitterly. “I understand. Me, I…I think I’m still trapped in the nightmares of that day,” he confessed.

“Huh?”

“…Never mind. Forget I said anything.” Liat shook his head and turned back to the fifth platoon’s cottage. “We’ll begin patrolling soon. Everyone, get ready.”

◆

It was 19:05 Imperial Standard Time. Leonis had his dinner beneath the lantern in front of the eighteenth platoon’s cottage.

Regina served him another helping of the soup. “Here you go. You’re still growing, kid, so you need to eat lots of meat.”

“…Thank you.”

Am I really growing, though?

Putting those doubts aside, Leonis focused on eating. The hard, preserved bread turned soft and tasty once he dipped it in the broth. The girls of the twenty-sixth platoon had come by, lured in by the scent, and Regina shared some of her cooking with them, too.

“Sorry. The rations alone are kind of bland,” Silesia said apologetically.

“Oh, come on, we’re all in this together,” Regina assured. “Plus, you healed Miss Finé for us.”

“Just leave some for the fifth platoon; they’re out on recon,” Riselia reminded her friend.

“Yes, understood, Lady Selia.”

It was then that Sakuya, who sat opposite of Leonis, suddenly tugged on his sleeve.

“Kid, can you trade me that piece of meat for one of my mushrooms?” she whispered.

“Fine, I suppose…”

“Thanks…”

But just as the two were about to make the exchange…

“Stop being a picky eater, Sakuya. You too, Leo, no swapping,” chided Riselia.

“D-darn…” Sakuya hung her head, defeated.

The mushrooms had been gathered nearby, and Elfiné’s analysis had concluded that they were safe to consume. Even in a forest covered in a miasma, plants still managed to grow.

“Besides, you don’t get to eat natural mushrooms in the city. They’re tasty,” Riselia added.

“Meh…” Sakuya pouted and reluctantly stuffed her cheeks with mushrooms. “…Mm… Oh, it’s surprisingly decent…”

Apparently, she liked it.

“You know, it’s pretty humid here,” Riselia said, pinching the hem of her uniform and fanning herself.

Leonis’s heart skipped a beat when he caught a glimpse of her bra.

“Yeah, it’d be nice if we could find somewhere to bathe for a bit…,” Elfiné added. “The lake with the statue is a bad idea. Voids could show up.”

Riselia frowned slightly. “Isn’t there somewhere else with water?”

“Give me a minute. I’ll have a look around.” Elfiné produced three Eye of the Witch orbs and launched them into the sky.

◆

“All right! Time to tidy up. ♪ ”

Shary hummed to herself as she walked through the twelfth stratum of Death Hold, a level known as Death’s Gathering. She enjoyed the cold, musty air that hung over this place. Her beloved master’s castle was a lovely place in her eyes. Although possessed of a terrible sense of direction, Shary knew this palace like the back of her hand.

At least, she thought so. In truth, the assassin lost her way once or twice before arriving at her objective—Death Hold’s subterranean treasury.

The vault’s contents were all organized by category and stored in separate rooms.

“First, I need to collect the magical items, as well as bones for creating undead.”

Gaining material for creating skeleton soldiers in this era was actually quite difficult. If Shary could find the bones of some large monster, she was

sure her master would be pleased. However, as she approached the doors to the treasury, something caught her attention.

The passage was barred by a massive crystal. And slumbering within the gemlike material were countless Voids.

"…Is this—?"

The next moment, as if reacting to the presence of an intruder, a crack ran through the crystal.

◆

Unfortunately, there were no suitable bathing spots. The best Elfiné found was a tiny pool formed by water leaking from the destroyed ruins, but it could barely fit two people.

"…Bathing in this might be a little difficult," Elfiné said, gazing at the footage on her terminal.

"Maybe we can work together and make a simple bath," Leonis suggested.

"You can do that?" Riselia asked.

"I can try."

Staff of Sealed Sins in hand, Leonis stepped into the woods. Even he was feeling quite sweaty and unpleasant from walking through the humid forest.

Honestly, why must the human body be so inconvenient?

Leonis burned through the trees in the way to approach their objective of the little pond Elfiné had found.

I believe this was originally a storehouse for skeletons, Leonis concluded after thinking back on vague memories of what Necrozoa's map looked like.

Holding up his staff, Leonis chanted a spell, "Create Stone Golem." Rocks around him began to levitate, aligning around the pool. "Farga!"

Boom!

The fourth-order spell exploded over the pond, digging into the ground beneath. The blast brought the water to a boiling point, and white steam rose from the now roomier body of water.

"…I think this should do."

As far as improvised baths went, it wasn't bad.

I believe I've earned the right to the first dip.

This was Leonis's kingdom, after all. Surely, no one would complain. He removed his uniform top, placed it over a tree branch, and produced water with his sorcery to adjust the bath's temperature. After testing how it felt with his feet, he gradually settled into the bath.

"…Phew. This really is quite revitalizing." Now submerged up to his shoulders, Leonis said something one wouldn't expect from the Undead King.

Leaning back against a stone wall, he looked up, gazing at the sky through a gap in the forest canopy. No stars were visible, of course, because of the pervasive miasma.

Veira must be nearing the Azure Hold about now.

Leonis was similarly making his way to the heart of Necrozoa. Oddly enough, both Dark Lords were returning to their ruined homes.

“Leo?” a voice suddenly called out.

“…Miss Selia?”

“Ah, Leo… There you are!” Riselia approached him with a lantern in hand, looking relieved. Seeing the steaming pool, her eyes widened in surprise. “That’s amazing… You actually made it.”

Flustered, Leonis asked, “Uh… Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Erm, well, you see…” Riselia looked away, her cheeks flushed, and then took off her uniform top.

“…?!” An astonished Leonis went stock-still as he heard the soft sounds of shifting fabric.

Riselia was quickly stripping down to her underwear.

“Hmm, Leo… You looking at me while I change is a little weird…”

“…I—I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, hurriedly turning away.

Wait, what am I apologizing for?!

There came the sound of water gently sloshing.

“…!” Leonis tried to remain motionless, but a pair of pale, willowy, cold hands snaked around him from behind.

“…We’re finally alone, Leo.”

“Miss…Selia?”

Locks of her silver hair spilled over Leonis’s shoulders. He could faintly feel the young woman’s chest press against his back. Riselia brought her lips to Leonis’s ear.

“…I want blood, Leo. I want *your* blood…”

At last, Leonis understood what this was all about. *It has been a while since she last had any.*

Riselia, as a Vampire Queen, consumed a substantial amount of mana. Because they’d been traveling in a large group for so long, she hadn’t been able to find a moment alone with Leonis.

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice.” Leonis lowered his head to make it easier for his minion to bite him. Immediately, Riselia’s grip on him tightened.

“I’ll make sure it won’t hurt.” Riselia’s tongue lapped over Leonis’s nape. “Mm…” Then she bashfully thrust her fangs into his neck. “…Mha… Mmm… Nhaa… ♪ ”

Her vampiric bite didn’t bring any pain—only a sweet, brief ache.

“Miss Selia…I feel as though you’ve been growing a bit greedy, lately,” Leonis stated. This prompted Riselia to let go of his neck and pout at him.

“…N-no, I’m not!” she said, puffing up her cheeks. “You made me like this, Leo…”

“I can’t deny that, but…”

Nibble. Nibble.

“…It, nnh… It hurts,” Leonis said, grimacing.

Riselia’s bites were usually playful and gentle, but this time, they almost felt angry.

“Leo…” His minion abruptly ceased biting him and spoke with a pout, “Leo, you’re not keeping any secrets from me, are you?”

“…”

“That girl from earlier…”

She meant Veira.

I guess it makes sense she’d be curious.

After pausing for a moment, Leonis eventually spoke up. “She’s…an old friend of mine. And a comrade, who worked and fought beside me for the sake of another.”

“Another…?”

“Yes.”

“Is that the person you said you’re looking for?”

She really is quite perceptive. Leonis smiled bitterly to himself. Riselia was a wise girl. At this rate, she was bound to discover his true identity before long.

“That person is very dear to me. I still don’t know where they are, but I think I’m starting to piece together some clues. I’m confident I’ll find them one day.”

“Okay, I understand.” Riselia let go of Leonis and moved away a bit. She hung her head and she fell silent.

“Leo, actually… There’s something I need to tell you, too,” she began after a while.

“What is it?”

Riselia clenched her fists, holding them in front of her chest. “When I fought that priest a few days ago, he—”

“Leo, Selia, are you there?”

One of Elfiné’s orbs swooped down from above, transmitting her voice.

“…Miss Finé, what’s wrong?”

“We lost contact with the fifth platoon.”

◆

Shortly before that conversation…

Liat’s fifth platoon was patrolling roughly two kilorels away from the campsite, when they discovered a massive ancient structure. It was a gaping hole in the ground, and their lanterns’ light failed to reach the bottom.

“It looks like the Seventh Assault Garden’s pole shaft,” Liat’s lieutenant, Delcea, observed.

Suddenly, Liat began squatting down and moaning painfully. “…U-ugh… Agh…”

“Captain? What’s wrong, Captain—?”

Something was off. Delcea and the other platoon members hurried over to him.

“…S…stay away…from me…!” Liat choked out, glaring at his comrades.

“Captain…”

The members of the fifth platoon froze as Liat's threatening aura washed over them.

"Dammit…I can…hear it… The goddess's voice…!" Liat grit his teeth as he tried in vain to cover his ears. "Aaah, aaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Whoooosh…!

Flames erupted around the young man, swallowing his body.

"…C-Captain! Eahhhhhhhh!"

The fire leaped from Liat to the member closest to him, Irma, whose arm caught ablaze.

"…?!"

Everyone else finally realized the gravity of the situation and activated their Holy Swords.

"We've got no choice; we need to suppress the captain!" Delcea shouted, holding up his Holy Sword, an iron ball.

Liat staggered to his feet, a massive broadsword in his hands. There was no hint of the calm, collected young man his allies knew.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

A bestial howl reverberated through the dark forest.

CHAPTER 8
THE DEMON SWORD RAGES

Upon returning to camp, Leonis and Riselia immediately recognized something was amiss.

"Regina!"

"Ah, Lady Selia…and the kid." Regina turned around to face them, standing in front of the cottage. "Where were you, Lady Selia? Your hair is wet."

"Huh?! Oh, erm…" Riselia awkwardly looked away and changed the subject. "Don't worry about it. What happened?"

Good grief, you're one terrible liar, Leonis thought, exasperated. At this rate, no matter how hard his minion attempted to hide her vampiric nature, the others would find out.

Thankfully, Elfiné jogged over and moved the conversation along.

"We lost contact with the fifth platoon. And Regil's group's gone silent, too."

"What?" Riselia's ice-blue eyes went wide with disbelief.

"The Eye of the Witch orb I sent with them got destroyed all of a sudden. I'm not getting any reactions from it," Elfiné explained.

"Did they run into Voids?"

Elfiné nodded. "That's very likely. But would two platoons run into enemies at the exact same time?"

"Hmm, isn't it possible the Hive's Voids all started hatching at once?" Regina asked.

"If Voids started appearing in such great numbers, I'd have noticed by now," Elfiné replied.

Leonis felt the ground start quaking under his feet.

What?

Brrrr, brrrr, brrrr… Brrr, brrr, brrr…!

The tremors gradually grew stronger. The forest's trees shifted as the shaking uprooted them.

"An earthquake?!" Riselia exclaimed in surprise.

"No, I don't think so," Leonis replied immediately.

He'd built Necrozoa over an area where such things were unlikely to happen. No one would construct an underground kingdom that spanned thirteen strata in an area prone to earthquakes. One thousand years had passed, but Leonis doubted the crust had changed that much.

Yet there was no debating that the ground was rumbling continuously.

"What's that?!"

"There's something shining in the sky!"

Familiar voices were shouting from the other side of the cottage.

The members of Silesia's platoon pointed up at an object visible through the forest canopy. Leonis followed their gazes.

"…Wh-what's that…?!" Regina stammered.

Far in the distance, a gigantic structure surfaced in the center of the forest: a great, black pyramid. It stood eighty kilometers tall, and a green mana glow streaked across its walls, forming geometric patterns.

"Is that an ancient…ruin?" Riselia gasped.

Leonis, who stood next to her, reacted differently.

It can't be! What's it doing above the earth?!

Leonis knew what that structure was. It was the heart of Necrozoa—the Goddess of Rebellion's shrine, the place where Roselia Ishtaris would make her divine oracle.

Did someone activate the Goddess Temple…?!

Leonis was in a state of utter confusion. What he saw simply couldn't be true. The only one who could activate the Goddess Temple was the Undead King. Not even Necrozoa's most high-ranking officers could do it.

The Dark Priestess Iris, the Underworld Knight Schteizer, the Black Wolf Emperor Blackas, the Dark Staff Officer Zemein, the Ebony Minister Melgia, and the Evil Bone General Derlich.

Of all of them, Iris and Melgia, being the priestess and minister respectively, were the exception and had the authority to activate the temple. Still, without Leonis's permission, they weren't allowed to set foot inside.

That shrine was a sacred space, reserved for Roselia and Leonis alone.

Who did this? Leonis grit his teeth in anger. A burning rage, the likes of which he'd long forgotten, filled his mind and body.

I may be a forgiving Dark Lord, but there are two things I never pardon.

The first was someone harming his minions. And the other was…

Anyone who would dare besmirch her holy name…!

Someone had impudently, sacrilegiously traipsed upon the sacred precincts of the Goddess Temple. Leonis would punish the offender most severely.

"…Wh-what's going on?" Silesia asked Elfiné.

"I don't know. Either way, we have to regroup with Liat's platoon."

"R-right…"

"There's a chance the two platoons we lost contact with are fighting the Voids. We have to hurry over and help them before it's too late."

Riselia looked around at the gathered Excalibur Academy students. "We should split up and go out to help one platoon each. Does anyone have any objections to that?"

The members of the eighteenth and twenty-sixth platoons all exchanged glances and shook their heads.

"Then it's decided. We should divide each group such that each has members suited to battle and support."

Riselia broke up the platoon members based on their Holy Swords' abilities, quickly forming impromptu teams.

Leonis thought the older students of the twenty-sixth platoon might have objected to letting a younger student like Riselia take command of them, but they were surprisingly cooperative. Part of this could be attributed to the emergency, but some older students had seen Riselia in the training matches and acknowledged her leadership prowess.

As befits my minion, Leonis thought proudly.

"Miss Finé, Leo, Miss Silesia, and I will go looking for Liat's platoon. Regina, Sakuya, Miss Meltis, and Miss Milea, you four go help Regil's platoon. Shia, Miss Shad, you two wait in the camp and use the relay point to contact the main force."

"Understood."

"Got it."

Silesia and the two other older students nodded. However…

"Miss Selia, I think I'd be better off on my own," Sakuya said, leaning against a tree in the back.

Riselia cocked her head to one side. "Why?"

"My Raikirimaru lets me accelerate and move faster. I can hurry ahead swifter than anyone here, and I'd be that much quicker on my own."

"But alone, you'll—," Silesia started to object, only for Sakuya to cut her off brusquely.

"You'll just be holding me back."

"Excuse me…?!"

The older students frowned, outraged at Sakuya's statement.

"Sh-she doesn't mean anything bad by it, really," Elfiné apologized hurriedly.

After thinking it over for a moment, Riselia said, "Fine. We need as much time as we can at the moment. Sakuya, you go on ahead. But don't do anything reckless."

"Understood, Miss Selia."

Wasting no time, the survivor from the Sakura Orchid took off into the woods, Raikirimaru in hand. Riselia looked around at the remaining members.

"We don't have a second to lose. Let's hurry."

◆

"Hoh-hoh-hoh, what a beautiful sight…"

Sitting at the foot of the Goddess Temple was the Dark Staff Officer Zemein. He looked up to the sky, an ecstatic smile on his lips. He had intruded upon a sacred precinct only the Undead King had the right to activate.

"Ah, but Her Holiness Roselia could trigger it, too…," Zemein remarked, toying with a black, triangular object between his fingers. The broken

fragment of the goddess was similar in shape to the pyramid. He held the shard aloft.

Sheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeen!

The surface of the wall began to shift, as if resonating with the fragment. A green mana glow ran freely across the pyramid's surface, forming a single streak that shot up to the heavens. The Goddess Temple was a magical device that served as a relay to Roselia, allowing her to transmit her prophecies of the future.

The voice of the Goddess of Rebellion would resonate, directly affecting those chosen by a Demon Sword.

"Awaken, Demon Swordsmen. Become sacrifices to fuel the Undead King's revival…!"

The mad old man's high-pitched laughter echoed through the night.

◆

Swhish, swhish, swhish…!

Numerous blades of blood, gleaming with mana, streaked through the forest. This was the power of Riselia's Holy Sword, the Bloody Sword. Since she'd tasted Leonis's blood so recently, she had an ample supply of magical energy.

"Selia, keep going," Elfiné told her, holding an Eye of the Witch orb in her hand. It was linked with her other spheres, which were spread out around the area, looking for signs of Liat's platoon.

"Understood!"

Leonis followed the two girls, glaring up at the Goddess Temple all the while.

Someone activated this temple while a group of humans happened to be nearby.

And they lost contact with Liat and Regil's platoons… This couldn't be a coincidence.

Is someone using my Necrozoa for some kind of ridiculous scheme?

Was it perhaps another plot concocted by the Devil of the Underworld's lackey, Nefakess Reizaad? Or was another force at work here? Whoever was responsible, Leonis would make sure they came to regret their actions. Undoubtedly, they didn't imagine a Dark Lord was hiding among the prey they intended to hunt.

But it is a bit concerning. I can't get in touch with Shary…

Leonis had been calling for her using telepathy sorcery for some time now, but she hadn't responded. Shary had probably gone down to the eighth stratum, which had a barrier that shut off mana around it.

She never did have any sense of direction, despite being an assassin.

"Wait…I'm detecting someone! Just ahead of us!" Elfiné shouted.

"Haaaaah!" Riselia swung her Holy Sword up and slashed through the branches in the way.

The Eye of the Witch illuminated the path ahead.

“Aaaaaaah!” a young man lunged at them, a fist-sized stone in his hand.

Immediately, Leonis chanted a spell, “Raspa!”

“Ugh!” A lump of condensed air knocked the assailant back. “Ngh… Aaah…!”

“Is this an enemy?” Leonis asked.

“Wait. He’s from the fifth platoon—”

Elfiné’s Eye of the Witch cast light on the attacker, revealing he was wearing an Excalibur Academy uniform. It was the deputy commander for Liat’s platoon, Delcea. He lay still on the ground.

“You went too far, Leo,” Riselia chided him.

“I-in my defense, I did make sure to hold back,” Leonis replied with a shrug, and he lowered his staff.

Delcea was injured, but it clearly wasn’t because of Leonis’s attack. His body was covered in burns.

“I’ll heal him,” Silesia said. She held her healing Holy Sword, a shining sphere, over the wounded young man’s body.

Elfiné kneeled down before Delcea. “What happened?”

“…? You… Get out of here, quick…”

“What’s wrong?”

“The captain… Liat, he’s… He attacked us…all of a sudden.”

“Liat? No…”

“It’s true. The captain’s Holy Sword went out of control, and…”

“Out of control…,” Elfiné’s repeated with evident grim realization.

“He started looking…all scary and sinister… Like a Void…,” Delcea continued, his voice shivering with terror.

“What happened to the rest of your platoon?” Riselia questioned as she vigilantly scanned her surroundings.

“…Gazetta and Irma were burned by the flames of his Holy Sword. I don’t know about…Bressla… I think she managed to get away like I did…” Unable to say any more, Delcea passed out, apparently having exhausted the last of his strength.

“H-hey, is he all right?!” Riselia exclaimed.

“Yes, he’s just unconscious,” Silesia assured.

“Please, keep it up.” Elfiné thanked Silesia and stood. Her face pale, she muttered, “A Demon Sword…”

“You mean like Muselle Rhodes?” Riselia asked.

“Yes, a Holy Sword going out of control… I’m sure that’s the only explanation,” Elfiné responded, her voice trembling.

“No… Why would Liat do that?”

“As part of the executive committee, he was involved in experiments related to Demon Swords. Perhaps that’s how he started hearing the voice of the goddess…”

“Voice of the goddess?” Leonis repeated, latching on to that phrase at once.

Thankfully, Elfiné didn't seem to find anything suspicious about his reaction.

"There are a few people who had their Holy Sword run wild and were placed in a medical facility. And they each claimed that a goddess gave them the power of a Demon Sword…"

"…A goddess granted them Demon Swords…?" Leonis whispered, and then he turned around and peered at the ebony pyramid. It was a magical device meant to transmit Roselia Ishtaris's voice…

Was it because he heard the Goddess of Rebellion's oracle…?

No, that couldn't be. Roselia had been defeated one thousand years ago, and her soul should have been reincarnated.

Is someone acting under the goddess's name?!

Leonis lifted the Staff of Sealed Sins and began chanting.

"Leo, what's wrong?"

"I'm going to check out the shrine… I mean, that pyramid. You stay here, please."

"Huh? Leo, wait!"

Riselia tried to stop him, but Leonis used his gravity control sorcery to float up into the sky and speed away.

◆

A bolt of pale lightning streaked through the dark forest. It was the glow of countless slashes. The air whistled as trees were felled, and the scent of scorched air filled the surroundings.

This was Thunderclap, a unique ability of Sakuya's Holy Sword, which allowed her to accelerate to unbelievable speeds. Sakuya was heading to where Regil's platoon was last detected. Tracking someone in dense woods wasn't a difficult task for a Sakura Orchid swordswoman. What's more…

I can smell them.

It wasn't a living creature she detected, but rather, Voids.

Sakuya slowed to a halt, Raikirimaru at the ready. She carefully looked around. And then…

"…Holy Sword…power…"

"Oooh… Power… Give me, power…!"

Two figures stepped into view. Sakuya grimaced and shook her head at the sight of them.

I was too late.

These were Holy Swordsmen from the twenty-first platoon. They approached Sakuya, their eyes vacant and clearly mad. Their Holy Swords had mutated into sinister, vile forms, dripping with Void miasma.

"Demon Swords…," Sakuya whispered, stepping back. "I didn't imagine I'd find what I was looking for here, but…"

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

One of the platoon members howled and swung their claw-shaped Demon Sword at her. Sakuya raised her voice in a battle cry as she brought

her weapon down to meet the attack. The massive claw shattered, as if it had been struck by lightning.

A scream shook the trees, and the Holy Swordsman fell to the ground.

“It doesn’t look like you can speak.”

Sakuya quickly changed position, wary of the other Demon Sword wielder. No, there was more than one remaining. Sakuya keenly felt the presence of another behind her. It was the twenty-first platoon’s captain, Regil Deusca. He trudged toward Sakuya mindlessly, dragging a whip-shaped Demon Sword after him.

“Did you consume a Holy Sword…?” Sakuya asked. Naturally, she received no response.

The other Demon Sword user shambled forward, perhaps hoping to surround the young woman. Left with no choice, Sakuya raised Raikirimaru.

“I’ll finish this before Miss Regina and the rest arrive.”

Her blade turned black and the miasma began seeping from Sakuya’s arm. Earlier, she had stated that others would hold her back, but that hadn’t been the truth. Sakuya couldn’t let anyone see her like this.

“Demon Sword, Yamichidori…”

The Demon Swords wielders seemed confused at the sudden change in their prey. They could tell, instinctively, that what they were facing was far greater than just a Demon Sword.

“I will defeat you before the rest of the group arrives.”

Sakuya’s promise echoed gently.

◆

Levitating in the air, Leonis glared down at the Goddess Temple.

“Leonis Death Magnus, the ruler of Necrozoa, orders you, Temple. Open your gates before me!” Leonis loudly proclaimed as he brandished an arm.

“…”

However, the obsidian-colored pyramid didn’t react.

Kh, it didn’t work…!

Admittedly, Leonis had anticipated as much.

No one could command the Goddess Temple except for the Undead King. Leonis himself had built it that way. Clearly the structure no longer recognized him as the Undead King now that he was in the body of a ten-year-old.

Grr, such an inflexible device!

Angered by its disobedience, Leonis pointed the Staff of Sealed Sins at the shrine.

“Open your gates! Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

Booooooooom!

Leonis launched a fireball that burst over the temple with an intense explosion. Tongues of crimson flame lapped around the building. The air trembled, and embers showered over the forest. This magic would have incinerated even flame-resistant red dragons. It was the strongest fire spell.

“…It did nothing…”

There wasn’t so much as a scratch on the pyramid’s walls. The Goddess Temple was the greatest structure Leonis had ever constructed. Even when the human armies ransacked Necrozoa, they failed to destroy this temple.

“…It’ll take time to do this, but I don’t have a choice.”

Leonis sighed and began intoning another spell. He loosed three fireballs, all eighth-order incantations, at once. No sooner had he done so than the peak of the pyramid began to glow with mana.

“…What?!”

A blinding flash erupted, and a shaft of light lanced toward the heavens, piercing the dark clouds. The light split in midair, and then the separate rays all flew down, converging on Leonis!

Vwooooooooooooon!

“Rua Meires!”

Leonis quickly deployed a defensive spell.

It’s the temple’s autonomous defense system…!

This, too, was something Leonis had constructed, but he’d never been on the receiving end before. He’d completely forgotten about it.

Vwooon! Vwooon! Vwooon!

The beams bore down on him.

A power spot barrier won’t be enough to block this!

The rays were made of mana the Undead King had poured into crystals one thousand years ago. Now that he was in a child’s body, and his power was greatly limited, he wouldn’t be able to overcome the beams.

Overwhelmed by the storm of mana, Leonis was sent tumbling to the ground.

“How about this? Vira Zuo!”

Leonis hurled an eighth-order gravity spell at his feet. The ground below him contorted, forming a gigantic crater.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

The earth crumbled at once, and Leonis plummeted into the ruins of Necrozoa. More streaks of light crashed into the surface above, creating massive explosions.

The Goddess Temple’s defense mechanisms wouldn’t attack Necrozoa itself.

It seems I’ve escaped, for now.

A system Leonis had devised had nearly been his undoing. The Dark Lord used a gravity control spell to slow his fall. Landing on the ground, Leonis lit up the tip of the Staff of Sealed Sins and looked around.

“What…?!”

Massive crystals had blocked off large chambers. And inside them were countless monsters.

“This is the core of the Void Hive…”

Hundreds upon thousands of Voids lay dormant. If they were to hatch all at once, it would spell doom for the Seventh Assault Garden.

“The impudent fools decided to infest my city…,” Leonis muttered unpleasantly.

He’d have liked nothing more than to exterminate these pests at once, but finding whoever activated the temple took priority.

“Hoh…I was wondering what all that racket was. It seems a human brat managed to sneak in.”

“…?!”

The amused voice of an old man echoed from somewhere deep in the darkness.

◆

“…What was that light?!” Elfiné raised her head in surprise.

A shaft of radiance had shot up from the pyramid’s zenith, dispersing into countless rays that poured down from the sky.

“Leo…,” Riselia said, looking at the flashes anxiously. She couldn’t leave to find him, however. They had to stay until Silesia finished healing Delcea.

I’m the only one who can defend this place right now.

Leonis presumably left her here because he trusted his minion. Riselia thought back to Muselle, who’d had his psyche eaten away by the Demon Sword. His mediocre Holy Sword became a Demon Sword that could manipulate whole crowds. So if an ace like Liat the Blazing Lion’s Holy Sword were to be corrupted, there was no telling how dangerous it would be.

“Why would someone like Liat do this…?” Riselia wondered.

“I think I can understand why he sought that power out,” Elfiné answered. “He blamed himself the most for what happened. His guilt over not protecting his comrades left him feeling responsible, so he threw himself into battle. But the power he wanted, the strength to protect everything, just wasn’t there…”

Elfiné trailed off.

Whooooooooosh!

Flames consumed the trees ahead of the group. And as they burned away, Riselia and the others could see the figure of a man approaching. In his hands was a sword enveloped in swirling fire.

“…Uuuoooooo… Graaaaah…!”

“Liat!” Elfiné shouted and rose to her feet. “Selia, let me help you.”

“Okay. Miss Silesia, take Delcea somewhere safe.”

“…Understood!”

Riselia held up the Bloody Sword as she confirmed her upperclassman’s reply.

“Graooooooooo!” Howling like an animal, Liat swung his Demon Sword down.

◆

“Oh, it’s just some child. Did you get lost?”

Eyeing the boy shivering in the darkness, the aged undead man smiled mirthfully. Slowly, he approached, like a predator toying with his prey.

“Wh-what is this place… Who are you?” Leonis took a step back, his legs shaking with fear.

“This was a great structure ruled by a Dark Lord. But now, it’s been reduced to a den for the creatures of nothingness.”

“A Void Hive… The whole place is a Hive?!”

“Indeed it is. And soon, the king to reign over all these Voids shall awaken.”

“A king of the Voids… You mean a Void Lord?!” Leonis tried to move farther away, but realized his back was pressing against a wall.

“Yes. All your Holy Swords shall become Demon Swords, and you will serve as sacrifices for the king’s revival!”

Snap… Snap, snap, snap…!

Zemein’s back contorted grotesquely. After swelling, six arms burst forth.

Whooosh!

One limb shot forward, grabbing Leonis by his slender throat.

“…Ugh!”

“The Undead King, Leonis Death Magnus, shall be reborn in this world and rule over the Voids!”

“Undead…King…?!” Leonis choked out, struggling vainly to break free. “What are you…trying…to do…?!”

“Such knowledge would be wasted on a dead child.”

Claws began digging into Leonis’s neck.

“…Ugh… Ah… Aaaah… Nng…”

Leonis thrashed in a desperate bid for freedom, but the spiderlike appendages refused to so much as budge.

“Yes, keep squirming. Entertain me for a while longer. I love nothing more than hearing the screams humans make when on the verge of death, you see. Especially when they come from pure, innocent youths…”

The monstrous old man’s face contorted in rapture, and he laughed in shrill bursts. His claws sunk deeper.

“Oh. Pure and innocent, you say?” The boy suddenly let out a dark chuckle.

“…Wh-what?!” Zemein’s eyes widened in surprise.

“…Heh, heh-heh-heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha-ha…,” Leonis continued ominously, despite still being strangled. “You really are in love with the sound of your voice, aren’t you? It’s been getting hard to hold back my laughter.”

“Wh-who are you?!” Zemein barked at him.

“Silence. And get your filthy hands off me…”

Slash!

The shadow under Leonis’s feet lashed out like a whip, severing the spiderlike arm grasping him.

“Aaagh! What did you do?!” The Dark Staff Officer fell to the ground, writhing and screaming in pain.

Leonis looked down upon the man’s pathetic squirming.

“Pardon. I did want to draw this out a bit longer…” Leonis’s lips curled into a cold grin. “But the farce ends here. What are you doing, Zemein?”

CHAPTER 9
THE UNDEAD KING

“Grooooh… Aaaaaaaagh!”

The broadsword came hurtling down, belching fire. Riselia brought up her Bloody Sword to meet it.

“Selia, dodge!”

“…!”

Riselia leaped back a few steps. The spot where she’d been standing a moment earlier suddenly exploded.

Boooooooooooooom!

The blast roared as smoke filled the air, obscuring Riselia’s vision. Flames burned intensely, rolling up into the breeze and forming a whirlwind. Had Riselia tried to parry, she’d have been caught up in the explosion.

His Holy Sword has that much power…?!

In order to win the inter-platoon training matches, Riselia had memorized the Holy Sword data of other platoons, and especially those belonging to ace members.

Liat the Blazing Lion’s Holy Sword, the Prominence Sword, was a weapon that had incinerated too many Voids to count. Yet, as far as Riselia knew, it never had the strength to make the ground burst like that.

“Selia, he consumed his partners’ Holy Swords.” An Eye of the Witch orb appeared out of the smoke and spoke in Elfiné’s voice.

“Consumed…their Holy Swords?”

“Yes. I can hardly believe it myself, but…”

Glowing numbers and text began rapidly running around Elfiné’s orb. It was analyzing Liat’s Holy Sword’s ability.

“That just now was Gazetta’s Flare Bomb ability, and Irma’s ability was…”

Whoosh!

The flaming broadsword cleaved through the air and was rapidly closing in on Riselia. She dodged, her hair billowing as she moved. The attack had been close enough to singe the ends of her locks. Those flames were fatal. An undead body could recover for as long as it had mana, but restoring burns would take a considerable amount of time.

“Haaah!”

Riselia gathered mana in her legs and then unleashed it, thrusting the tip of her sword forward. However, Liat deflected the attack.

He’s strong! Riselia thought as she quickly took a few steps back.

Since infancy, Riselia had studied the sword fighting styles of knights. Recently, she’d been training under the skeleton swordsman Amilas. Even

with all her efforts, there was a palpable difference between her and Liat. Sakuya was likely the only one who could match him in raw skill.

I guess I have no choice…

Riselia nicked her arm with her blade, allowing droplets of blood to drip to the ground. The red liquid formed a spiral that rapidly enveloped her limbs. A moment later, a crimson dress manifested over her body.

The True Ancestor’s Dress—a unique garment only a Vampire Queen could don. Riselia’s argent locks shone with mana as power surged through her. Yet, while the outfit explosively augmented her physical prowess, it consumed significant amounts of magical energy. Riselia hadn’t properly mastered using it yet.

I have ten seconds at best… I have to finish this!

Kicking off the ground, Riselia thrust forward, loosing the swiftest attack she could muster at the grip of Liat’s weapon.

Undaunted, Liat swung his broadsword up, repelling the strike.

“Kuh…!”

“Groooooooooh…!”

With a raging howl, Liat brought his Holy Sword down.

Grrrnh! Grrrrrk! Grrrnnnh!

The ground quaked as intermittent explosions sounded.

The Flare Bomb’s ability…!

Using mana to leap up, Riselia came plunging down from above.

“Blood Chain!”

Blood laced with mana formed interlocking ringlets that coiled around the Blazing Lion.

“Hyaaaaaaaah!”

Riselia trained her Blood Sword at Liat’s arms, hoping to force him into dropping the Demon Sword. She couldn’t afford to kill him. Her blade sunk deep into the young man’s shoulder.

I’ve got to destroy that Demon Sword!

Pulling her weapon free, Riselia slashed again. However…

Whoooosh!

…Liat’s body suddenly caught fire.

“What…?!”

“Selia, get away! The Demon Sword is—”

Unfortunately, Elfiné’s warning did not come in time. Riselia’s body was enveloped in flame.

◆

“Curse you, curse you! My arm, my aaaarm!” Zemein shrieked, the pained cries echoing through the underground chamber. “You’ll pay for this, whelp… I’ll lop off your limbs and feed them to the Demon Swords!”

Zemein’s remaining five appendages jutting from his back slithered toward Leonis like serpents.

“Hmph. You look down on me over how I look? I see your pride has taken its toll on your intellect,” Leonis spat with a sneer.

“Disappear…!” Zemein screeched. His writhing arms lanced at the boy.

“Learn your lesson already, hopeless fool.”

Slash, slash, slash!

Blades of darkness jumped out of the shadow at Leonis's feet, effortlessly severing the limbs.

"…Ugh… Gyaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Leonis looked on as Zemein bellowed in agony. "I suppose I should've expected as much from you," he stated coldly. "The only thing you ever cared for was merging creatures together. You were worthless in battle and employed callous, foul methods. My current minion is merely fifteen years old, and she's already far smarter than you ever were."

"N-nnngh… Wh-what…?! Wh-who are you…?!" Zemein cried, fear plain in his eyes. It seemed the old man had realized he wasn't facing an ordinary child.

"I suppose this is where I should stop toying with you, then… Hmm?" Leonis suddenly paused.

Seizing upon his chance, Zemein began chanting a spell. "Flames of darkness, bring your tyranny to bear and destroy my fooooooe!"

Booooooooooom!

An explosion shook the subterranean cavern, filling it with light.

"Ki-hi, ki-hi-hi-hi-hi…! This is a sixth-order spell, magic beyond the reach of anything a human can achieve! It should reduce him to nothin—"

"Hmph. Such a long recitation and that's the best you can accomplish?"

"Wh-what…?!"

The smoke cleared, revealing Leonis standing composedly behind a barrier of shadows. There wasn't so much as a speck of dirt on his uniform.

"Mel Ziora was a spell of my own invention. Was it always so weak?"

"H-how…?" Zemein croaked, stepping back fearfully. "Wh-what… What are you…?!"

"You still haven't figured it out? My word. You truly are hopeless." Leonis shrugged and produced the Staff of Sealed Sins from his shadow. "Is this clear enough for your dimwitted mind?"

"I-it can't be… Th-that rod! It belongs to…!"

"I am the Undead King you were so keen on resurrecting," Leonis declared, tapping the bottom of the Staff of Sealed Sins against the ground.

"Mel Ziora!"

A raging sphere of fire sped past Zemein and exploded behind him.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

All the water in the cavern evaporated at once, exposing Void Hives that had been submerged. Zemein's knees buckled as he gazed at the newly made crater behind him, and he fell.

"I-it can't be… It can't… But then… How…"

"Mm?"

"This is wrong… It clashes with the goddess's prophecy!" Zemein cried.

"Prophecy?" Leonis asked him suspiciously.

"No, this is a trick… It can't be…! My lord is here, in Necrozooooooooooooa!"

The old man's withered body ballooned as the miasma began to seep from his every pore.

Crack, crack, crack…!

Fissures formed all around, with Zemein at their epicenter, and then… his body ruptured from the inside out.

Whooooooooooooooooooosh!

A gigantic monstrosity clawed its way from the fractures in space.

"Hmph, so you, too, were consumed by the Voids. No, you allowed yourself to be."

Tremors shook the chamber, and rocks tumbled down from above.

Crack, crack, crack, crack, crack…!

All the crystals in the area began splitting open, and a horde of Voids crawled from the translucent cradles.

◆

"Selia…!" Elfiné shouted, her voice overpowered by a thundering explosion.

Riselia's body was hurled into the air, arching as it came crashing toward the ground.

"Selia!"

Without regard for the danger, Elfiné hastened to her friend's side.

"…Ugh… Kuh…," the younger girl moaned in pain. "Miss…Finé… Run…"

Ignoring her friend's plea, Elfiné grasped Riselia's hands tightly and tried to help her up. Elfiné then turned around and saw Liat surrounded by fire, looking like a demon in every sense of the word.

That's the power he stole from Irma's Holy Sword…

Irma's weapon enveloped the user's body in a powerful, billowing whirlwind. After Liat's Demon Sword consumed it, the Blazing Lion became able to produce burning twisters. Liat approached Elfiné slowly, seeming more like an inhuman monster than the leader she had known. Curiously, he didn't attack.

Is he trying to consume Selia's Holy Sword?!

Elfiné grit her teeth. She couldn't let him do it. Riselia had gone through so much to get her Holy Sword, Elfiné refused to let her lose it now!

“Liat!” Elfiné stood, moving away from Riselia, pulling out a handgun she kept for self-defense. The weapon was based on the Ray Hawk, an Artificial Relic. She quickly undid the safety and fired. The bullet was swallowed by the fire swirling around Liat, however.

Elfiné had never expected it to work. This poor imitation couldn’t do much damage to such a mighty enemy. The shot had been meant to garner Liat’s attention. He looked away from Riselia and directed his eerily vacant gaze at Elfiné.

“Liat, is this the kind of power you wanted?!” she shouted at him while loosing more rounds from her gun.

The conflagration around Liat grew, the heat stinging Elfiné’s skin. If that fire were to engulf her, she’d perish instantly. Even knowing that, Elfiné kept her pistol trained on Liat.

“Is this the kind of Holy Sword you wanted…?!”

“*I…!*” the demonic figure groaned.

“…?!”

“My…Holy Sword…couldn’t…protect them…!”

It couldn’t have been the man’s natural voice, for how could he speak while surrounded by a torrent of flame? One of the Eye of the Witch orbs floating around had picked up the words. Liat’s psyche was calling out, consumed though it was by his Demon Sword.

“I just…wanted…power…protect…what matters…!”

“Liat!”

The intense fire surged, painting the darkness of night scarlet. Elfiné very nearly faltered backward, but she held her ground. All so she could hear his cries. The man who carried the guilt of his comrades’ deaths and accepted the power of the Demon Sword wanted to stop this.

That’s why he told me about the Demon Sword and the voice of the goddess!

The Eye of the Witch orbs gathered around Elfiné. They resonated with the screaming of Liat’s soul and conveyed it to her.

“Liat, you’re…!”

“Shut up… Shut uuuuup…!”

Whoosh!

Liat brought his scorching broadsword down. The ground ruptured violently, sending Elfiné into the air.

“Miss Finé!” Riselia screamed.

“…!”

Collapsed on the ground, Elfiné’s fingers dug into the dirt. The nightmare she had relived countless times surfaced from the shadowy recesses of her mind. The memories of that terrible day, of her greatest regret.

But I won’t run away anymore.

Elfiné rose to her feet to save Liat's soul. Casting away her pistol, she glared straight at the monster standing among the incandescent flames. Liat swung his burning sword again.

"Grooohhh! Gaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"This isn't the kind of power you sought."

Elfiné was afraid. There was no denying it. Still, she stood unwavering. She was the only one who had a chance of washing away the emptiness eating at Liat's soul.

"Let me show you the true strength you were looking for. The power of a Holy Sword!"

The Eye of the Witch orbs gathered around Elfiné began expelling particles of light. The motes converged, forming an intense brilliance.

"Eye of the Witch, Mode Shift! Vorpal Ray!" Elfiné extended her arm and gave her final order. "Fire!"

A white, blinding flash swept over the area. The intense firepower that surged from the orbs engulfed the burning demon.

"Waaaaauuuuugh!" Liat's scream rang in Elfiné's ears.

The surge of radiance overtook his massive form… And the burning Demon Sword shattered.

◆

"They're still alive. Please, can you heal them…?" After confirming Liat wasn't dead, Elfiné shouted after Silesia, who dashed over.

"Yes, leave it to me," Silesia replied.

"…I'm okay, focus on Liat," Riselia groaned while rising to her feet.

"Huh?! Ah, but you were hurt so badly…," Elfiné remarked, shocked.

Riselia had taken a direct hit from the Demon Sword.

"M-my Holy Sword's power weakened the flames a little," explained Riselia.

"I…see." Elfiné was still a little suspicious, but since Riselia was seemingly okay, she accepted the excuse.

Suddenly, the Eye of the Witch orbs above blared out in warning.

"What?!" Elfiné looked around frantically. "Voids…!"

Crimson eyes leered at the girls the dark. Two sets, three, five, seven… there were more every second.

"Did they hatch…?!"

"Oh no…!"

Voids were emerging from the forest with seemingly no end to their ranks.

"…What do we do?!"

"I think our only option is to charge past them."

Riselia wiped the sweat from her brow, gripping her Holy Sword in her other hand. Breaking through the enemy was the only option. Still, the sheer number of Voids wasn't going to make that an easy task, and carrying the injured Liat would slow them down even more.

“…Leave me behind…,” Liat gasped out, having regained consciousness.

“Liat?!” Elfiné turned to look at him.

“The fifth…platoon should be just past here… Help them…”

“Are they all right?!”

“I stole their…Holy Swords…but I didn’t…kill them…”

“All right. You don’t need to say anything else.” Elfiné stood, and looked to the Voids surrounding them.

“Hurry… Go…,” Liat urged her.

Elfiné shook her head. “I’m not letting another comrade die on me.” The Eye of the Witch orbs gathered over her. “This time, I’ll save you.”

The Vorpal Ray swirled.

Vwoosh, vwoosh, vwoosh, vwoosh!

The light gathered in Elfiné’s Holy Sword shot forward and swept through the army of Voids, cleaving a path through.

“…Miss Finé, that’s incredible!” Riselia said, her eyes wide.

“I’ll clear the way. We’re going to save the fifth platoon and get out of here!”

◆

“Ki-hi-hi-hi, you’ll die in pain, cur! How dare you assume my master’s name…!”

The gigantic, hulking monster swung its tentacles down at Leonis.

Boooooooooom!

The limbs slammed into the rockface, crushing a group of small Voids that had been unfortunate enough to be in their path.

“Hmph, to think you’ve become a Void Lord.”

Leonis traveled through the shadows and emerged on another side of the cavern. Zemein’s body had become a gigantic monster of writhing, wriggling flesh.

“There’s a touch of irony to this. You look just like the chimeras you were so fixated on creating…”

As Leonis thought about it, he realized that when he’d first seen Voids, their disgusting forms had reminded him of Zemein’s handiwork.

“Voids are…the perfect life-forms! Incarnations of…the limitless possibilities of evolution…!”

Mouths formed all over Zemein’s fleshy body and opened, firing off streaks of sizzling energy.

“Farga!”

Leonis’s spell collided with the heat rays, creating an explosion that shook the cavern.

“Eighth-order spell—Sharianos!” Leonis chanted.

Blades of ice lanced forward, slicing away Zemein’s tendrils. However, the shredded appendages quickly regenerated, billowing an oily miasma all the while.

“That regeneration… You turned yourself into a chimera?”

“Ki-hi-hi, ki-hi-hi-hi. Well observed. But this form is only a partial evolution… Once I merge with the Six Heroes and the Dark Lords, I shall become this world’s god…!”

“I see. That does sound like the kind of insipid plan an imbecile like you would come up with,” Leonis taunted.

Zemein had plotted to revive the Undead King only to absorb him.

Merging with a Dark Lord is likely impossible, though.

Veira, the Dragon Lord; Rivaiz, the Lord of the Seas; Gazoth, the Lord of Beasts; and Dizolf, the Lord of Rage. Each Dark Lord was defined by their overwhelming strength as individuals. That was what set them apart from the Six Heroes, who had needed to fuse with gods. Anyone who would try to merge with a Dark Lord would simply be overtaken in turn.

Crack, crack, crack!

Countless Voids broke out of their Hives on the underground lake’s floor, and they began writhing toward Leonis.

“Flamis!”

The Undead King unleashed a wave of heat that incinerated the monstrous things.

“Tch, they’re weak, but when there’s this many of them…”

It made Leonis want to eradicate Necrozoa if only to be rid of the many Hives inside it. Unfortunately, Zemein wasn’t giving him the chance to draw Dáinsleif.

As bothersome as it is, I’ll just have to stomp them all out using magic…

Suddenly…

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

…A shadowy whip cut through the flood of approaching Voids.

“Are you all right, my lord?!” Leonis’s assassin maid appeared from the dark, her whip in hand.

“What were you doing, Shary?”

“My apologies, I was sweeping away the vermin infesting the treasure vault.”

She pinched up the edges of her skirt in a curtsy and bowed her head respectfully.

“Very well. Then take care of the pests here, too,” Leonis stated.

“Understood!”

Shary leaped into the swarm of Voids, brandishing her shadowy lash.

“Ooooooooough…!” Zemein brought his tentacles up again.

“Eighth-order spell—Al Gu Belzelga!”

Brrrrr…!

The strongest fire spell in existence burned everything in its way.

“Nnghaaaaaah!” Zemein shrieked.

“Crawl on the ground like the insect you are. It suits you.”

Leonis held the Staff of Sealed Sins aloft and constructed an altar of bones. Standing on top of it, he looked down at the so-called ultimate life-

form squirming beneath him. It was so pathetic and unsightly Leonis couldn't help but pity it.

What a shame. I was so excited when I fought Veira, but...

Stomping out this loathsome insect didn't elicit anything in Leonis.

"A cretin like you wouldn't usually justify drawing out my Demon Sword, but…"

Leonis twisted the grip of his staff and drew Dáinsleif…!

Thou Art the Sword to Save the World, Gifted by the Heavens.

Thou Art the Sword to Ruin the World, Made to Rebel Against the Heavens.

A Holy Sword, Sanctified by the Gods.

A Demon Sword, Blessed by the Goddess.

Such was the Demon Sword Dáinsleif's wicked decree!

"Any vermin that infests my kingdom will be mercilessly exterminated," Leonis stated coldly.

"It can't be… That… That light, it's, aaaaaah…!" Zemein bellowed.

Whooooooosh!

The massive blade of darkness crashed down on the center of the Void Hive.

◆

The destructive light of the god-slaying Demon Sword reached as far as the subterranean complex's eleventh stratum, wholly annihilating the Void Hive. Gazing at the vast crevasse that had been cleaved beneath him, Leonis sheathed his sword in the staff.

"My lord, the scoundrel is still alive," Shary informed him.

"Yes, I know. I missed him on purpose."

A lump of tattered flesh was floundering at the edge of the abyss, desperately trying to escape.

"Now then, Zemein. I have a lot of questions for you," Leonis said, ruthlessly stomping on the heap.

"Aaaah…Master…Leonis… Have…mercyyyyyyyyyy…"

"Hmph. So you finally understand that I am the true Undead King," Leonis replied with an icy glare. "Answer my questions well and I may consider sparing you. What do you say?"

"Aaaah… Please, mercy…," Zemein begged pathetically as he repeatedly tried and failed to regenerate his ruined form.

"Very well. Your first question, then," Leonis began, tapping his staff on the ground. "What are you and your cohorts hoping to achieve by resurrecting the Dark Lords and Six Heroes?"

"I only sought to serve you…Master Leonis! I tried to revive you…!"

"I see. So you wish to die," Leonis spat, producing a flame on the tip of his staff and pressing it against the writhing mound.

"Aiiiiyaaaahhhh! Weeee work to bring about…the goddess's prophecyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!"

“Her prophecy? What are you talking abou—?”

Leonis only knew of one thing that could be. The prediction that the Goddess of Rebellion would be reincarnated after one thousand years. Perhaps there was another foretelling he was unaware of?

“…O-only he knows the contents of the prophecy… We act in his name…”

“‘He,’ you say? Is that your new master? The Dark Lord of the Underworld, Azra-Ael?”

“Azra-Ael…Devil of the Underworld…?” Zemein muttered, seemingly surprised.

“Yes. He was an adherent of the goddess, after all.”

“…”

“Hmm. So I was right. What is he plotting?” Leonis pressed.

“N-no…,” Zemein abruptly replied.

“What?”

“The one we serve…is actually…”

“My lord!” Shary cried from behind.

…?!

Leonis jumped away as lightning suddenly rained down on the wriggling heap of flesh.

“Gyaahaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Numerous spheres of plasma surged up around Zemein. Letting out a final scream of agony, what was left of the old man was reduced to cinders.

What?! Leonis followed the lightning back to its source. Staring down from a cliff was a blue-haired girl wearing a white mask.

“You got in the way of my questioning. Who are you?!” Leonis demanded.

“…”

The masked girl didn’t care to answer. With a flap of her long white garb, she drew some kind of sign in the air.

Crack… Crack… Crack…!

Seemingly in response, the same fractures that accompanied Voids began forming around the mysterious young woman.

“…She can’t get away!” Shary reflexively hurled a dagger at the girl. One of the fissures consumed the projectile, however, and the young woman vanished into another one.

“Who was she, my lord…?” Shary asked.

“…Hmm, she was likely sent to watch over Zemein.” Leonis shrugged and grumbled to himself. “I can’t believe it didn’t occur to me there might be another nearby to make sure Zemein didn’t talk. Evidently, he was a disposable pawn.”

Leonis then glanced down. Where Zemein had met his end now rested a black, triangular fragment of stone.

“What’s this…?” he wondered aloud.

“A mana crystal, perhaps?” Shary suggested.

“I don’t think so… Well, no matter. I’ll investigate later.” Leonis knelt, picked up the shard, and offhandedly tossed it into his shadow.

A sudden lethargy gripped Leonis, and his legs trembled.

“My lord, are you all right?” Shary asked, concerned.

“Don’t worry. It’s just the backlash from using the Demon Sword. I’ll just…sleep here, for a bit,” Leonis answered. The Dark Lord then rubbed his eyes and lay on the stone floor of the cavern.

“M-my lord, m-may I offer m-my lap as a pillow?!” Shary stuttered, her cheeks tinged red.

“Mm? No, you…you go watch over Riselia…,” Leonis sleepily commanded.

“…Understood.”

As he listened to Shary’s seemingly disappointed response, Leonis let his heavy eyelids flutter shut.

EPILOGUE

The young woman’s black hair fluttered in the wind, the ebony locks vanishing as they blended with the dark, starry sky.

“So? How does it feel to have gained an undead body?”

From her seat before the temple’s altar, she offered a hand out to the boy who had just risen from death. The boy who, just a few months ago, had been called a hero.

“It doesn’t quite seem real yet, I suppose.” The boy shook his head and gazed at his hand.

“Yes, I imagine it’d feel that way at first,” she remarked.

“So I’m a Dark Lord now…,” the boy said, cracking an ironic smile that didn’t fit his young age.

He’d defeated the Dark Lords of the old world and became a hero of humanity, but the very kingdom he’d protected betrayed him. They took everything from the boy, even killing him.

It was then that he met her, the Goddess of Rebellion, Roselia Ishtaris.

“Yes, a Dark Lord. You are now an enemy to this world,” Roselia stated, patting his head affectionately. “But remember this, no matter what or when, *I am always by your side*, Leo.”

◆

“Nn… Mm…”

Leonis awoke from pleasant slumber.

“Miss…Selia?”

Rousing from sleep, Leonis found a pair of clear ice-blue eyes gazing down on him.

Riselia gave him a gentle smile. “Ah, Leo. You’re finally awake.”

Her slender fingertips gently tickled Leonis’s cheek. Leonis felt like his head was resting on something soft, so he finally realized he was lying on her lap.

“O-oh, I’m sorry…”

Leonis quickly sat up and looked around. It was early morning. He was inside a military vehicle that was speeding down a road. Dawn was on its way, and through the window he could see the sun rising over the dark wilderness. Apparently, Elfiné was at the wheel.

“You can keep sleeping if you want, Leo,” she called out to him from the driver’s seat.

“You get to enjoy Lady Selia’s lap, after all,” Regina teased.

I was still awake when we left the forest.

The eighteenth platoon was on its way back to the Seventh Assault Garden. The main Hive in the center of the forest had been annihilated by a *mysterious earthquake*. Riselia and the others had eliminated any stray Voids that had survived.

Not being able to take Zemein captive was a rather painful loss, Leonis thought, recalling the blue-haired girl that had killed the transformed old man. *Who was she?*

She wasn’t a former officer of the Dark Lords’ Armies, like Nefakess and Zemein. Leonis thought her white garb curiously reminiscent of Sakuya’s traditional Sakura Orchid attire.

Sakuya was currently asleep, her head resting on Regina’s shoulder. She had gone off on her own, slaying Voids and destroying crystals.

“Your face is cute when you’re asleep, kid,” Regina said, showing him a photo she had taken with her terminal.

In the image, Leonis’s head was resting on Riselia’s lap. His mouth was hanging half open, and he appeared rather ridiculous.

“H-hand that over!” Leonis demanded.

“Nope. This is for my personal enjoyment,” Regina refused impishly.

“Send it to me later, Regina.”

“You got it, Lady Selia. ♪ ”

◆

Glancing at the girls messing around with Leonis through the rearview mirror, Elfiné heaved a small sigh.

We all came back from a Void Hive alive.

The injured members of the fifth and twenty-first platoons, including Liat Guinness, had all been evacuated back to the Seventh Assault Garden via military aircraft. After he recovered, Liat would have to stand trial for his actions.

He may have been in a state of temporary insanity because of the Demon Sword, but his punishment won't be lenient.

Those two members of the fifth platoon who'd had their Holy Swords consumed still lived. Perhaps, even in madness, that had been a step too far for one who sought power to keep his friends safe.

He was strong. Stronger than I ever was…

Yet even Liat had succumbed to the might of a Demon Sword. Elfiné bit her lip as she tightened her hold on the steering wheel. The Demon Sword Project—forcing Holy Swords to evolve. Someone had started it up again after it had been placed on indefinite hold. And there was still a chance Elfiné's father was involved.

What is the Phillet family hoping to achieve…? Elfiné pondered. And why did Clauvia share so much with me? Is she hoping I'll do something for her?

Whatever the case, something big seemed to be taking place in the capital, and Clauvia was likely intent on involving Elfiné in it.

No, this isn't about Clauvia. This is a battle I want to be part of…

Elfiné looked to the back seat through the rearview mirror again. Riselia and Regina were arguing over whose lap Leonis would sleep on.

I won't let them get tangled in this, but… Maybe getting his *help could work*, Elfiné thought as she leveled her intense gaze at the ten-year-old boy sitting between the girls.

◆

Upon returning to his room in the Hræsvelgr dorm, Leonis found a gigantic black wolf lying on his bed.

"…Mm. You've returned sooner than expected, my friend," Blackas greeted, rising and stepping down to the floor.

"I don't mind you resting on my bed, Blackas, but do clean away your fur; Riselia might find it," Leonis told him.

"Yes, understood." Blackas swept Leonis's bed with his fluffy tail. "Did you find anything valuable in Necrozoa?"

"Regrettably, no. Nothing of worth," Leonis replied before producing a large bone from the shadow at his feet.

"Is that a giant's femur?" Blackas inquired.

"A present for you. You like these, don't you?"

"Much appreciated, old friend."

Leonis tossed the bone over, and Blackas skillfully caught it between his jaws in midair.

"I suppose it wasn't a completely wasted trip…," Leonis muttered, sitting on his bed. He then appraised Blackas of the events in Necrozoa.

“Hmm. Zemein. A detestable lout, that one.” Blackas scoffed at the mention of the name. “To think he’d return in this era, too…”

“I couldn’t confirm he was working for Azra-Ael, but a yet unknown leader appears to be using the Dark Lords’ Armies officers to do their bidding. Zemein mentioned something curious, as well. Apparently, they’re laboring to fulfill a prophecy left behind by the goddess…”

“A prophecy?”

“Yes. But as far as I can tell, no such prediction exists,” Leonis said, shaking his head. “According to it, I should still be sealed in Necrozoa.”

“Hmm. So as far as our enemies are concerned, your revival is an irregularity.”

“…So it would seem.”

Perhaps Riselia’s finding him ahead of time had altered the prophecy.

If I’d have awakened even a few days later…

Arakael Degradios would have likely triggered a Stampede and destroyed the Seventh Assault Garden, Tearis Resurrectia would have become the vessel for the Goddess of Rebellion, and the Dragon Lord Veira would have been consumed by the Voids.

“Regardless…” Leonis smiled fearlessly. “If they dare oppose me, I need only trample and crush them underfoot.”

Just then, Leonis heard a gentle knock on his door.

“Leo, can we talk for a minute?” came Riselia’s voice.

“Huh? Oh, erm, yes… Give me a second!” Leonis replied hurriedly.

Blackas dove into Leonis’s shadow and disappeared, taking the bone with him.

“All right, come in.”

The door opened, and Riselia stepped inside. She was likely fresh out of the shower, because her hair was visibly damp.

“We filed our report to the academy. The official report is that a massive earthquake destroyed the Hive,” Riselia stated, taking a seat on the bed. “You were the one who destroyed it, though, right, Leo?”

“…” Leonis took a deep breath. “Yes. That was me.”

Riselia had already seen him use Dáinsleif. Realizing that there was no point playing coy about it, he simply confessed to the truth.

“I see…” Riselia nodded, as if resolving to do something. Her ice-blue eyes gazed fixedly at Leonis. “Actually, I was…able to decipher part of the inscription on that statue we found in the lake.”

Stupefied, Leonis could only get out, “…Huh? You did? How?”

“I found a book in my father’s study and there was a note folded into it. It explained how to translate part of that odd language. And the book used the same characters as the carvings, so…” Riselia paused ominously before pulling out a piece of paper and reading it aloud. “‘The Great King…of the Undead Kingdom…Leonis Death Magnus.’”

“…?!”

Riselia drew near Leonis’s face and whispered into his ear, “Leo… Who are you?”

AFTERWORD

Thanks for your patience, everyone. This is Yu Shimizu.

This is Volume 5 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy*, a school-based sword fantasy where Dark Lords and heroes clash in a futuristic setting with humanity on the brink of extinction!

This time, we saw the group's reliable big sister figure, Elfiné, grace the cover art. Of course, for all Leonis's concerned, the whole eighteenth platoon is populated by big-sister types, but Elfiné has a unique, mature charm to her. Long black hair and black stockings are justice!

In this book, we have a number of things that foreshadow future events, like the Phillet Company's Demon Sword Project and the voice of the supposedly deceased goddess. There's also the change in the stars that Veira mentioned. We can't forget Sakuya's older sister, the shards of the goddess, or Duke Crystalia's book, either. And of course, we have mysterious figures like Nefakess and Zemein, and their conspiracy.

Leonis must expose it all and foil his enemies' plots while keeping his identity as a Dark Lord a secret. Don't forget about the elven hero Arle, who didn't appear this time around. She and the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes, who once taught Leonis, are both involved, too.

Many exciting twists and turns await!

Now for some thanks.

To Asagi Tosaka, thank you for this volume's beautiful illustrations! That includes the cover art with Riselia and Elfiné, Shary with her *dango*, and Leonis getting caught in a headlock. Everyone's expressions during the comical scenes were lovely! Asagi Tosaka also handles the fantastic art for *The Level 0 Demon Lord Starts Life Anew in Another World as an Adventurer* and *Heat the Pig Liver*. I'm always so excited to remember I have Asagi Tosaka handling the illustrations in this series.

To Asuka Keigen, who produces high-quality art for the manga version every month, your cute characters and exciting battle scenes can only be described as incredible! Volume 2 of the manga goes on sale next month. Expect battle scenes with many Voids during a Stampede and the climactic fight against Arakael Degradios. Please check it out!

To my editors, thank you once again for all your support. I apologize for all the trouble I always put you through. I'm very sorry (It's important, so I said it twice!). I also want to thank the publisher and bookstores for delivering my works to the readers. It's all because of your combined efforts that this is possible!

However, the biggest thanks goes to you readers for picking up these stories. Thank you so much!

Now for an announcement. We have a collaboration going on with Bokuto Uno's series, *Reign of the Seven Spellblades*! I picked *Seven Spellblades* up on the day it came out and fell in love with it, so I'm quite honored to collaborate with this series. I even got to chat with Bokuto Uno. Please be sure to check it out!
See you in Volume 6!

—Yu Shimizu, August 2020

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